PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO | PS PLUS

PLAY

NO.1 FOR PS5

ISSUE 38
APRIL 2024
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→PS5 EXCLUSIVE

RISE OF THE RONIN

A samurai-sharp open world from Ninja Gaiden's devs

DEATH STRANDING 2

Metal Gear's creator delivers baby ninja and electric guitar battles

SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG'S BACK FOR A TAKEOVER

RETRO RACING: NEW STAR GP'S DEVS ARE IN POLE POSITION

CAN METRO AWAKENING SAVE PSVR2?

Final Fantasy Special

→EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL

Why this bold new era is the perfect time to dive into the RPG titan

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

The most ambitious remake ever? Discover our first verdict inside

THE WORLDS OF FINAL FANTASY

How Square Enix expand on the unforgettable places you love

→ WE'VE PLAYED IT!

DRAGON'S DOGMA 2 WILL CHANGE YOU

Or at least the future of open world gaming. It's that good!

→ EXPERT BAT-REVIEW

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

Campaign cleared. Endgame mastered. Does it have it?

FUTURE

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Welcome

Final Fantasy and PlayStation go hand in hand like little else third-party. For many, the defining memories of both PS1 and the RPG series are of being blown away by the seventh entry, but it's a series that has grown and flourished, taking many directions over the years. Which makes this month's cover takeover a special one.

The next wholly new adventure on the horizon is Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail (p42). With the MMORPG's tenth anniversary on PlayStation, and the epic tale that we followed through many expansions now at an end, we're literally setting off to unexplored horizons as we sail to the sunny continent of Tural. It's a bold new era for the long-running online adventure that seems committed to many more, and we've a big chat with Naoki Yoshida all about it.

But to move from the white obelisk back to the grey pebble that was PS1, Final Fantasy VII remains as important a game as it was back in the '90s. After all, is it even just a game? Now the numbered entry is a bona fide series in its own right. We've spent hours upon hours with Final Fantasy VII Rebirth (p54), and while it's not quite enough to whack a score on it we still deliver you our first verdict. A review-in-progress, if you will. Needless to say, it's shaping up to be quite special. We also take a further look at how Final Fantasy's worlds (p60) have expanded over the years.

That's the biggest console exclusive of this year covered, so what about 2025 and on? As usual, Hideo Kojima has the answers (p6), with Death Stranding 2 pushing boundaries, and even an announcement that Mister Metal Gear is returning to the stealth genre with his next game (which sounds next-gen).

For games you can play right now, we've been really going deep with our packed reviews section this issue, including the launch verdict on Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League (p70), Persona 3 Reload (p78), Granblue Fantasy: Relink (p90), and more! We hope you enjoy reading about it, and join us for more to come!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
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@MrOscarTK

GAME OF THE MONTH
Banishers: Ghosts Of New Eden
BEST TYRANT
Final Fantasy XII

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OUR WEEKLY
NEWSLETTER

THIS MONTH'S FINAL FEW

Daniella Lucas
CONTRIBUTOR
Helming our MMORPG ship as we sail towards a new Final Fantasy expansion, Dani has kept us ship shape and ready.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Granblue Fantasy: Relink
FAVE FINAL FANTASY
Final Fantasy XIV

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
Constant exposure to FFVII means Jess is at risk of Mako Poisoning something fierce, but Aerith makes it worth it.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Persona 3 Reload
FAVE FINAL FANTASY
Final Fantasy IX

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
As a supermarionation fan, Mim hopes the Stingray-like Harold Halibut can match up to the golden years.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Lil' Guardsman
FAVE FINAL FANTASY
Final Fantasy XV

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
Milf's been waiting years for Kojima to return to tactical espionage action. What's another console generation? *sobs*

GAME OF THE MONTH
Ultros
FAVE FINAL FANTASY
Final Fantasy VI

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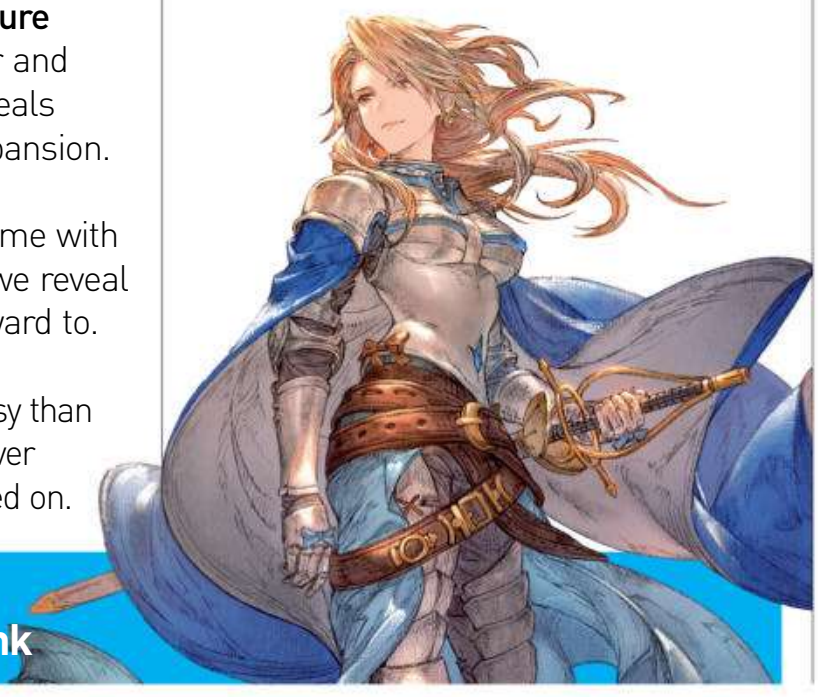

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Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

Kojima announced a completely new stealth game, his first since the almighty Metal Gear Solid V.

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Shadow The Hedgehog returns

A little overwrought perhaps, but Sam's relationship with his Bridge Baby was definitely a highlight of the first game.

Kojima doubles down on PS5

Two upcoming games from Hideo Kojima coming to PlayStation

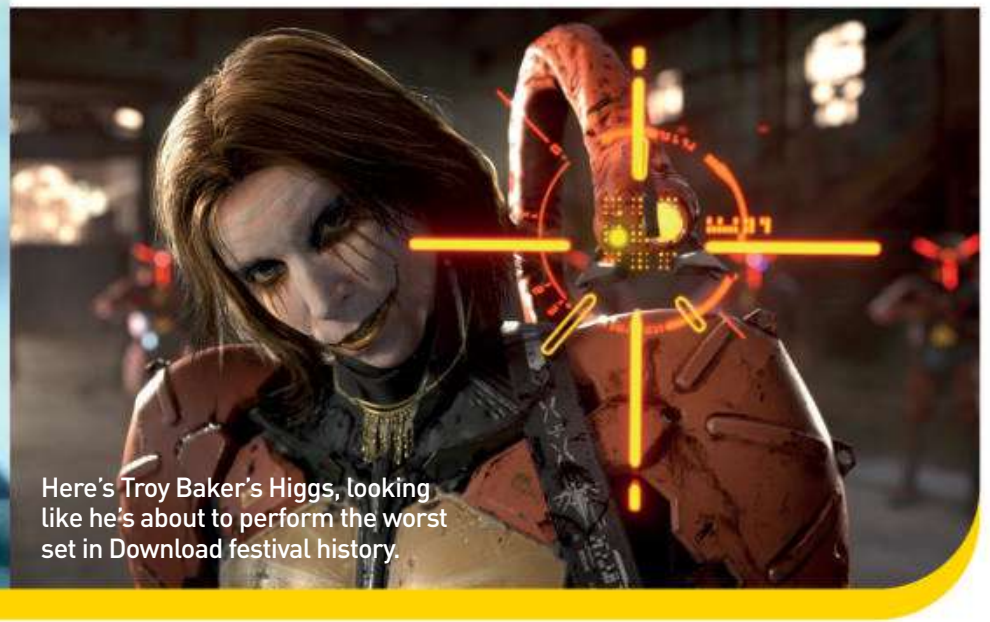
We'd assumed Hideo Kojima was all-in on Xbox after he spent five hours of his allotted stage time at last year's Game Awards talking up the game he was making for that console. But then he appeared in Sony's first State Of Play stream for 2024, and it couldn't have been more of a Kojima love-fest unless Mads Mikkelsen had leapt out of a cake. We knew Death Stranding 2: On The Beach was well under way, but Kojima also announced a completely new stealth game, Project Physint, his first since the almighty Metal Gear Solid 5.

The hopefully working-titled Project Physint is described as an 'action espionage' game as opposed to Metal Gear Solid's 'tactical espionage action'. (We'd be surprised if there are absolutely *no* tactics involved, mind, unless Kojima's always dreamed of making a stealth game starring Mr Bean.) As well as being a game, it'll be a movie too – though whether that means something like the long-promised Death Stranding film (what's happening with that?) or more of a combined vision has yet to be revealed. Kojima mentioned that he's just a couple of years away from having worked in the industry for 40 years, and said of Physint: "I am confident that this title will be the culmination of my work." Well, we'll probably be waiting a lot longer than two years to play it (but hopefully fewer than 40) as Project Physint won't start production proper until Death Stranding 2 ships next year.

STRANDING OVATION

We'd be more disappointed by the long wait ahead of us if DS2 didn't look like a must-play. It's got a sentient stop-motion puppet companion, a winged cat possibly made of oil with a big slurpy tongue, a scenery-scoffing Troy Baker wielding a deadly electric guitar and killer makeup skills, and a baby coughing up a drone. What does it all mean? Wait and see. We finished Death Stranding *and* its director's cut and can still say we understood about 2% of what was going on.

A sequel that can hopefully avoid the original's flaws and expand on its best ideas.



Here's Troy Baker's Higgs, looking like he's about to perform the worst set in Download festival history.

For the uninitiated, Death Stranding followed the adventures of Sam Porter Bridges, a wobbly courier wandering the desolate wastelands of a post-apocalyptic America, building roads, ziplines, and – yes! – bridges to reunite a divided United States. While the game was single-player, the things other players built in their worlds affected yours, which led to a curiously satisfying feeling of connection. On top of that, the often-oversimplified act of getting from A to B in an open world was given a brilliant shot in the arm by making you consider things like carrying weight, balance, and the perils of different

CORE APPEAL

It's not hard to see why Sony being a film studio would appeal to a director determined to make film versions of his videogame work happen. Dare we dream of shorter cutscenes in the games if he can scratch that cinematic itch elsewhere?

types of terrain. What let it down was disappointing stealth (from the creator of Metal Gear!), diminishing horror (from the creator of P.T!), and cutscenes that seemed to go on forever (from... actually, that one tracks).

In other words, it's perfect for a sequel that can hopefully avoid the original's flaws and expand on its best ideas. Death Stranding was also eerily prescient of the Covid-19 pandemic, so here's hoping Death Stranding 2 is all about an age of prosperity and good looks for all. Sadly that seems unlikely, despite new subtitle 'On The Beach' sounding like Sam gets a well-earned vacation. (If you're into old movies, it might also make you think of the 1950s post-apocalyptic gloomfest of the same name.)

Sam *is* travelling somewhere new, leaving the United States setting of the last game, with mentions of a 'continent' and the Mexican border, along with a beautiful shot of some desert. The crew of scene-stealing scientists who helped us last time have all scattered. We'd be well up for a getting-the-crew-back-together structure, though we'd also happily settle for having the faintest idea what's happening. Kojima remains one of the few game makers with the clout and prestige to get Triple-A budgets for his increasingly odd ideas, and that's always worth celebrating. What other big-budget game boasts a necklace that also appears to be a functioning pair of extra hands? Or a location that seems to turn the cast a moody shade of blue? How about a baby weeping oil?

DEATH METAL

The trailer closes with Troy Baker's villain, Higgs, not letting a little thing like 'dying in the first game' stop him from turning up again. He's been given a makeover that members of Insane Clown Posse might consider a bit much, and now wields a guitar that fires electro-bullets when he riffs on it. We get an extended fight scene between Higgs and a cyborg ninja (if you're playing Kojima trope bingo at home, take a drink) which looks spectacular, albeit irritatingly relegated to the cutscenes. Seriously, we'd better get to have a go on that death guitar, even if Kojima forces us to dig out our old Guitar Hero controllers to do it. That might seem preposterous, but then, so did the idea of one of PlayStation's greatest hitmakers suddenly returning to a genre he'd appeared to have long abandoned. PS5 is getting a full-on assault of Kojima Productions weirdness and a new stealth game from the director of the greatest stealth game ever made.

It's the most exciting time to be a fan of the man since a Playable Teaser mysteriously dropped on the PlayStation store a full decade ago. Of course, Silent Hills sadly met a fate worthy of one of the series' protagonists. But with what appears to be full backing from Sony, we're optimistic that this story will have a much happier ending, one that won't leave us shedding little oily tears of our own.

*** Do you want Project Physint or DS2 more? Tell us at play@futurenet.com**

We'd better get to have a go on that death guitar, even if Kojima forces us to dig out our old Guitar Hero controllers.

Easily the most gorgeous shot in the trailer. Just look at that sand!

1

2

3

4

5

1 Fragile returns, along with this scene-stealing sentient puppet. **2** Here's a mysterious female character with no dialogue. Again. Sigh. **3** Machines replacing humanity seems to be a theme. Maybe it's a good thing? That'd be a fresh take. **4** Meet Slurpy, the oily cat with wings. Fingers crossed that licking up mess isn't a mechanic. **5** What's that winged creature soaring across this massive moon?

TO THE ROOT

Besides the floral motif, The Short Message has a connection with Silent Hill f: the Higurashi visual novels. The lead writer on the upcoming f, Ryukishi07, created the series, while Message's writer, Kiichi Kanou, has contributed to Higurashi spin-offs.

Ixnay from the TK

Oscar unpacks the latest goss

Having earned a reputation around these pages as 'Mister Vita,' you can bet I'm excited by recent rumours of a potential followup to PlayStation's handheld hardware. It's high time Sony jumped back into this gaming arena, especially as the space has only gone from strength to strength through the introduction of dockable hybrid kit like Valve's Steamdeck and Nintendo Switch.

Sony's most recent foray in this pick-up-and-play postcode, the streaming-focussed **PlayStation Portal**, makes me pause for thought, though; a product with deluxe presentation, Portal was ultimately too feature-light to justify its price tag. Still, if the rumours are to be believed, any true handheld successor remains a way off, and would possibly form only one part of a multi-prong strategy for a new console generation. Between hybrid consoles and mobile gamers, handheld is becoming an increasingly key space PlayStation cannot ignore – the future may well be dockable.

No exit

Silent Hill series set to expand far beyond the fog-obscured town boundaries

Silent Hill 2 in Unreal could boast stop-and-stare visuals – as long as the action doesn't degenerate into whack-a-nurse.

Silent Hill is a series about being trapped by the past. In both the 2001 PS2 original and Bloober Team's upcoming remake, James Sunderland travels to the town of Silent Hill in search of a time in his life he knows on at least some level is impossible to truly recapture.

The Silent Hill 2 remake currently has no fixed release date, but, like a spectre, it did recently appear to us once more. Moody shots of the Woodside Apartments remade in Unreal Engine 5 and accompanied by Akira Yamaoka's Magdalene definitely tug at our heartstrings. But remakes need to trade in more than nostalgia. After showcasing puzzles reimagined in gorgeous detail, the latest gameplay reveal takes another direction, almost half of its runtime dedicated to combat, with a more modern over-the-shoulder third-person view keeping you close to the action.

In the 2001 original, combat is a key element but much less of a focus; running past fighty fiends is often a viable strategy, with enemy encounters more about bolstering a sense of unease and propelling you forward. For this latest look at the remake to focus so much on monster mashing is a choice – maybe it's pitching to an audience beyond fans of the original's contemplative pace, or perhaps Bloober is announcing a bloody shift in direction.

WRONG TURN

But in case you're impatient to see that town in your restless dreams, another game shadow-dropped alongside this gameplay reveal. Silent Hill: The Short Message is a free experience that attempts to expand the series beyond the usual confines of the town.

In the deprived city of Kettenstadt in Germany, teen artist Anita is caught in a loop of despair. As Anita, you explore a derelict block of flats, sprinkled with knowing graffiti, notes, and diary entries alike, while intermittently being pursued by one of the more striking monster designs the series has seen in years. Unfortunately, it culminates in an ill-advised collectathon during an extended chase sequence right before Short Message's last word – goodbye tension, hello frustration.

Furthermore, there's no escaping the fact that this cast of teen girls seems to have been predominantly written (and overwritten) by a team of older blokes, or that themes of teen suicide and abuse are handled far from subtly. As Heather Mason remains one of our favourite horror protagonists to this day, it's a disappointing outing beyond the city's limits for sure.

*** SH: The Short Message is free now on PS5, and takes about two to three hours.**

And we thought London Underground was bad. Here's hoping no other 'passengers' make direct eye contact with us.

Mind the mutants

Metro 2033 prequel arriving on PSVR2 later this year

When there's nowhere left to run, sometimes all you can do is go back to the beginning. Metro Awakening presents a prequel to the subterranean scares of Russian author Dmitry Glukhovsky's post-apocalyptic novel series – with a gripping twist. Like in 4A Games' previous adaptations, you're stealthing and scavenging through derelict tunnels criss-crossing beneath Moscow, though this time you're scrabbling for survival in a fresh VR vision from Vertigo Games.

Metro's retrofitted tech comes into its own in VR. Donning your respirator, dispensing spent shell casings, and cocking the Shambler shotgun all takes on a pleasing tactility thanks to the Sense controllers. It really sells the stakes of life in mutant-ridden Moscow, to say nothing of the pants-ruining effect monster attacks now 'enjoy' in VR. Picking your way forward through abandoned train carriages in the dark, it's difficult to predict what you'll find – or what will find you.

> Donning your respirator, dispensing shell casings, and cocking the shotgun all takes on a pleasing tactility.

RUSSIAN INTO THINGS

So why venture down there in the first place? New protagonist Serdar is searching for his wife, who's disappeared. Based on a fresh concept crafted by Glukhovsky (who serves as a story and lore consultant on this project), Serdar perhaps stands a better chance of surviving than most due to his work as a doctor. This man of science attempts to keep a cool head by approaching things rationally, but much defies simple explanation underneath the city.

Unearth more when this horror FPS launches on PSVR2 later this year.

DEV ACCESS

A Grand Prix star is rising

Getting under the bodywork of the retro-tastic **New Star GP** with New Star Games' community manager Mark Baldwin

Our team can all fit round a table. There's only ten of us," says New Star Games' community manager Mark Baldwin. "We've never done anything like this before, it's completely out of our comfort zone." Well, if that's the case, how come the studio's Grand Prix game is packing more features than many full-price racers? Let's get under the carbon fibre bodywork and take a look.

Visually, New Star GP's flat-shaded polygons nod to Sega's 1993 arcade classic Virtua Racing, but it feels deeper thanks to some impressively interwoven sim-like additions including staff management, car upgrades, and driver rivalries. But just like its arcade inspiration, New Star GP distils the sport. This pick-up-and-play ethos looks likely to set New Star GP apart from its peers. "The way that we always try to do our games is to squeeze down everything into short play sessions. I think it comes from our past doing mobile games. In New Star Soccer, you just play the attacking moments. Retro Bowl, again, it's just the attacking parts. When we approached this, we were like 'How can we get a GP-like feel to something and just boil it down to five or six minutes?'"

Despite the races' brevity, it's a large game. "I reckon it'll take 40 to 50 hours for most people to play everything when it launches," says Mark. "And that's before you even play split-screen multiplayer and custom championships."

The seasons comprise five decades of single-seater F1 racing from the '80s onwards. All the names and faces are different enough from the real thing to avoid licensing issues, but close enough that F1 fans will feel right at home. In fact, it's pretty much the 3D '80s F1 game Codemasters' F1 2013 always wanted to be.

"In each decade we've tweaked it so there's one particular driver who gets more annoyed than others. In the first decade, in the '80s, it's Nigel Mawson. You then hear people in the office, cursing him. 'I've p****d Mawson off again!' It's brilliant the way it works. Some people don't see it because they're very careful drivers. But once it starts to kick in and in the more difficult decades when it's harder to avoid collisions and the AI's a bit more aggressive, you will definitely have rivalries. But you also have the opposite as well – you'll have admirers. And sometimes they'll call you up and say 'Can we have a race 1v1?' either as a rival or an admirer. You can also license tech from other teams. But if you're trying to license it from your rival's team, it's much more expensive – they put the price up!"

Fortunately these mechanisms are highly visible during play, with drivers displaying cheeky emoticons as they pass you, and deliberately banging wheels with you if you get too close. The modern rules are out the window too, with aggrieved AI drivers weaving down the straight to cut off your overtake. It's refreshing to have AI that plays properly dirty, especially when it's reacting to your own aggression.

> **We have damage – you can switch it on or off. Damage is a huge part of the game.**

GAMES SHUNT

Collisions in many modern racers mean little, but the effects here are real. "We have damage – you can switch it on or off. Damage is a huge part of the game. You have to look after your brakes, you have to look after your wing – you can't go round bashing your way through everything because it will have an impact and you will notice dragging, you can blow your tyres out, have massive flips..."

Pit stops are crucial, involving tyre choice and refuelling. You can even fix blown brakes.

Even so, the races don't feel contrived, as faster cars disappear if you can't keep up. "We didn't want to have rubber banding; most racing enthusiasts hate it with a passion. But again, balancing that over a six-lap race, to make it constantly feel like you're in a race, was really tricky as well. I think that's one of the reasons why you always start from the back of the grid. It adds more to the game. People asked if we could have qualifying and practice, but we want to distance ourselves from the official games."

Instead, New Star GP has enriched its cartoony world with extra personality, like candid news reports between races or an engineer getting sad that you praised a different department, then being thrilled when you big them up at the next interview. The result is a game that keeps on surprising you. In fact, with its emphasis on rivalries, short races, and mechanical damage, it could almost be named Super Monaco GP III. If that means anything to you, you definitely won't want to miss this one. Look out for a review soon.

*** Basically the game every child of the '80s dreamed of, this looks promising.**

1 There's no online multiplayer, but you can play in four-player splitscreen. **2** Team staff can grant you perks. **3** While unlicensed, some tracks look very familar. Côte D'Azur, anyone?

Flips, damage, dynamic weather, rivalries... New Star GP is way more full-featured than a lot of full-price racing games.

I AM THOU
The Aigis set menu offers the Bao Burger Of Destruction, a strawberry Moonkist Dorayaki, and a yellow melon-flavoured Fountain Dew drink. You may ask 'who gets the burger at a ramen place?' Social link bestie and friend of the mag Dash Wood.

PlayStation voices
The month in mouthing off

"WE SAID, 'PORTS WOULD BE NICE TOO, BUT WHAT WE'D REALLY LIKE TO SEE IS A SILENT HILL REMADE FOR CURRENT-GEN CONSOLES,'" LEVEL DESIGN DIRECTOR RIKA MIYATANI ON HOW HEXADRIVE INITIALLY PITCHED TO KONAMI.

"FOR THE FIRST FOUR OR FIVE MONTHS, THE GAME WAS KIND OF AN OPEN WORLD INSPIRED BY BLOODBORNE. AND IT WAS PURELY MELEE FOCUSSED." CO-GAME DIRECTOR ANTHONY NEWMAN REFLECTS ON EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF TLOU PART II IN BTS DOC.

"AND NOW I AM CHECKING MIDI FILES OF SOUNDTRACK OF KOUDELKA. I COMPOSED THOSE DATA 25 YEARS AGO." MANA SERIES COMPOSER HIROKI KIKUTA IS REMASTERING TUNES.

Tasting Tartarus

Noodle joint Yokocho offers delicious limited-time Persona 3 Reload menu

We've got enough energy now for another go at tackling Tartarus.

What are you to do after a long Dark Hour slaying shadows? Slurp some ramen with a Social Link bestie, that's what, whether in a game or in real life. Noodle restaurant chain Yokocho is celebrating the release of Persona 3 Reload (read our review on p78) with a limited-time menu at London locations 8 Heddon Street and 35a Panton Street. We donned our S.E.E.S gear to investigate.

The Protagonist set menu, led by the tonkotsu-style Gourmet King Ramen, followed by a coffin-shaped chocolate brownie dessert called Sweet, Sweet Thanatos (hopefully not a transformed person), and all washed down with a blue melon-flavoured Balm Of Life fizzy drink, seems an obvious choice for any fan of the game. So obvious, in fact, that we ordered something else.

THOU ART I

The Mitsuru Kirijo set menu offers Execution Noodles – don't worry about the name, it's vegetarian-friendly! Spicy vegetable miso broth is topped with perfectly cooked hosomen noodles, tofu, tenderstem broccoli, mushrooms, and seaweed. The vegan ice cream Marin Karin parfait that follows features a hint of red bean paste sweetness, while the red melon soda and coconut jelly Snuff Soul drink is genuinely refreshing. Generously portioned and flavourful, this feast felt like an all-out attack from the ice queen herself – and that's without mentioning the 'bolt on' starters, which we also had.

The Mega Protein Bowl is fit for the king of gains himself, Akihiko Sanada, featuring deep-fried prawn atop a generous portion of rice and vegetables. Then there's the Weird Takoyaki. While their in-game namesake isn't made with octopus, these crispy little balls of goodness *definitely* are – leaving us to guess why they're so-called 'weird' (and why they're repped by archery queen Yukari Takeba).

Each set menu costs £25, with one of the aforementioned add-ons setting you back another £5 on top. As meals out in London go, that price point isn't completely terrible, plus every order comes with a free character pin badge featuring one of six designs. But tempted as we are to assemble S.E.E.S in pin form, it wouldn't be kind to our wallets...

*** Yokocho's Persona 3 Reload set menus are available every day until 1 April.**

All hail Shadow

Sonic X Shadow Generations shows off a whole other 'hog

When's a remaster not a remaster? When it's ajar just enough for something new to slip in. Sonic X Shadow Generations isn't merely a prettied-up version of the excellent 2011 PS3 game, it features a whole new campaign centring Shadow.

First introduced in Sonic Adventure 2 as a counterpart to Sonic, Shadow quickly gained fans, starring in games alongside the Blue Blur and even headlining his own in 2005. That one had him using firearms and riding a motorcycle, a sort of Flanderisation of the character to the point of being oddly charming, meaning it holds a place in the hearts of many.

While the character has since been dropped from many Sonic releases, to fans who adore the '00s games he's an icon. The nostalgia fans (us included) feel for the games Sega made at that time, combined with Shadow's upcoming appearance in the third Sonic movie at the end of the year, means his legacy is just as ripe for revisiting as Sonic's own was when Sonic Generations first released to celebrate the series' 20th anniversary.

Which means Shadow will be baring it all across his campaign, with no oddity left unrepresented – it'll even include Black Doom, the devil-like figure who tempts Shadow to the dark side in his own game. A standalone story that can be played separately from the Modern and Classic Sonic time travel team-up, it promises to dive into Shadow's backstory and spotlight his powers, making it an intriguing counter to the light and breezy main story. If nothing else, that fits Shadow.

> While he's been dropped from many Sonic releases, to fans who adore the '00s games Shadow's an icon.

*** Sonic X Shadow Generations comes to PS5 and PS4 this autumn.**

So far we've seen references to Sonic Adventure 2 and Shadow The Hedgehog – what more from the darker hero's past will be revealed?

DEBATE

Are exclusives still worthwhile nowadays?

With Xbox set to bring exclusives to PlayStation, is this the start of a perception shift?

MIRIAM MCDONALD
OPERATIONS EDITOR

"THE CONSOLE WARS ARE BORING; LET'S ALL PLAY TOGETHER."

Having been making games magazines for more years than I'll stick a number on, other-console and multi-platform as well as PlayStation, I'm tired of console wars, which bring out the worst in players. The only good reason for a game to be platform-exclusive is if it requires something of the hardware that other consoles can't deliver. Not everyone can afford the latest hardware, let alone several different consoles. If we can all play together regardless of hardware and share the best gaming has to offer, isn't that going to bring out the best in all of us, as well as our consoles? ■

MILFORD COPPOCK
MANAGING ART EDITOR

"IF YOU'D HAVE ASKED THE 22-YEAR-OLD ME, I'D HAVE SAID YOU CAN'T HAVE PLAYSTATION WITHOUT EXCLUSIVES."

Of course, that was a *long* time ago when the console wars were raging, but it's a very different world now. You could argue that exclusives foster healthy competition between rival platform holders, but it does feel like there's been a big shift in attitudes towards console-specific games. So what do I think now? Well, the older, wiser, definitely greyer and more open to change version of me (version 5.0) is happy to let everyone, regardless of format, have some PlayStation/Xbox gaming goodness. ■

OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
EDITOR

"EXCLUSIVES REMAIN IMPORTANT FOR PLAYSTATION, BUT SMART PC SYNERGY HAS BENEFITTED MULTIPLAYER."

It's been a good few years since PlayStation began to bring its exclusives to other platforms – namely PC – and I think most of us will agree that having more people play hasn't felt like a bad thing for us. Recently, online game Helldivers 2 being released across PS5 and PC simultaneously has only invigorated the community. Similarly, the Sony-developed MLB The Show series has been multi-platform for years. Still, it's important that PlayStation continues to own exclusives as part of its brand identity. I wouldn't expect PlayStation to be as gung-ho about doling out its exclusives elsewhere as the two giants' operating models are still just too different, but where it makes sense it's great to have as many players as possible enjoying the games we love – especially when it makes for healthier online play. ■

JESSICA KINGHORN
GAMES EDITOR

"WHY NOT INVITE EVERYONE TO THE GARDEN PARTY?"

Recently I reconnected with an old friend who is very much not a gamer, but nonetheless played and enjoyed The Last Of Us. Exclusives like this can be console-sellers, bolstering the walled gardens of platform-holders. The Last Of Us was already a phenomenon, and the Part I remake on PC (though questionable in many ways) saw the title connect with an even bigger audience. As excited as I am for upcoming PS5-exclusive Final Fantasy VII Rebirth, I look forward to one day soon sharing this next chapter with my fellow Tifa-and-Aerith-fanfic writers – er, I mean, friends – on PC. Console exclusives aren't yet a thing of the past, but I'm also not that fussed about the garden wall crumbling eventually. ■

"You could argue that exclusives foster healthy competition."

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Campfires

Whether you want rest or romance, the fireside is the perfect place for it all

1 CHRONO TRIGGER

This has to be one of the most iconic fireside chats in all of gaming history: seeing your comrades gather around to reunite with their friend Robo, who has been working for 400 years while the others were only gone for a minute. Never mind Robo-exploitation; it's a touching moment that deepens your connection to the time-travelling squad.

2 FINAL FANTASY X

Listen to my story... this is a singular, iconic campfire where the game begins as the characters reflect on their journey, and also where you realise just how much you're going to lose as you press on for the final stretch. We're not crying, you are!

3 RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

The life of a cowboy isn't complete without a night in the open by the fire, under the stars. Eat some beans, save your game, and maybe have a little singsong with your gangmates. It takes work to keep a good camp going, though, so make sure you pitch in with those chores.

4 DON'T STARVE TOGETHER

Sometimes all that stands between you and the horrors of the encroaching darkness is a flicker of firelight. Bathe in its warm glow at the centre of your encampment and try to ignore the terrible noises that taunt you from just beyond where the light fades.

5 BALDUR'S GATE 3

Not just a place for resting up and snacking on all the salami you scavenged to restore your spell slots, BG3's fireside is a place for plot revelations and even some romance. All the best neck nibbles and randy bear encounters you could wish for start right here – this is truly the GOAT of campfires.

6 THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

Camp smoke in the distance can be a sign of hope or equally of danger in the mountains of Tamriel. You'll often find a bedroll laid out and a pot of soup hanging over the crackling flames, but you might have to dispose of the current campers first. Sorry, not sorry.

7 ELDEN RING

In a world of countless deaths the light of these bonfires is a reprieve. There's nothing quite like finding somewhere to save and knowing you don't have to cut your way through all those enemies again. It's time to relax and hopefully stop thinking about all those Runes you lost on your last run.

8 GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

When you're trudging up a mountain through two feet of snow, the warm glow of a fire becomes a necessity to stop the fingers of your sword arm from freezing fast. You might not be able to save your progress by these firesides, but they will at least stop you from dying.

9 OUTER WILDS

When you're stuck in a timeloop there's always time for one of the most important campfire traditions of all: roasting marshmallows. The physics for this simple act are perfect – don't get too close or stay too long or you'll burn all your sugary treats. But if you do, don't worry, because you'll get another opportunity.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Final Fantasy XV
The perfect spot to earn EXP and for Ignis to test out his new recipe after a day out with the lads. Blazing Braised Gizzards all round!

Shovel Knight
Beside this triangular beacon is the best place to rest your greaves and reflect on your journey to find Shield Knight, take it from us.

Tomb Raider (2013)
The light of the fireside is the perfect place to upgrade your weapons with all that scrap you found. And you can fast travel off afterwards.

Did we miss your favourite fireside? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at **twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag**

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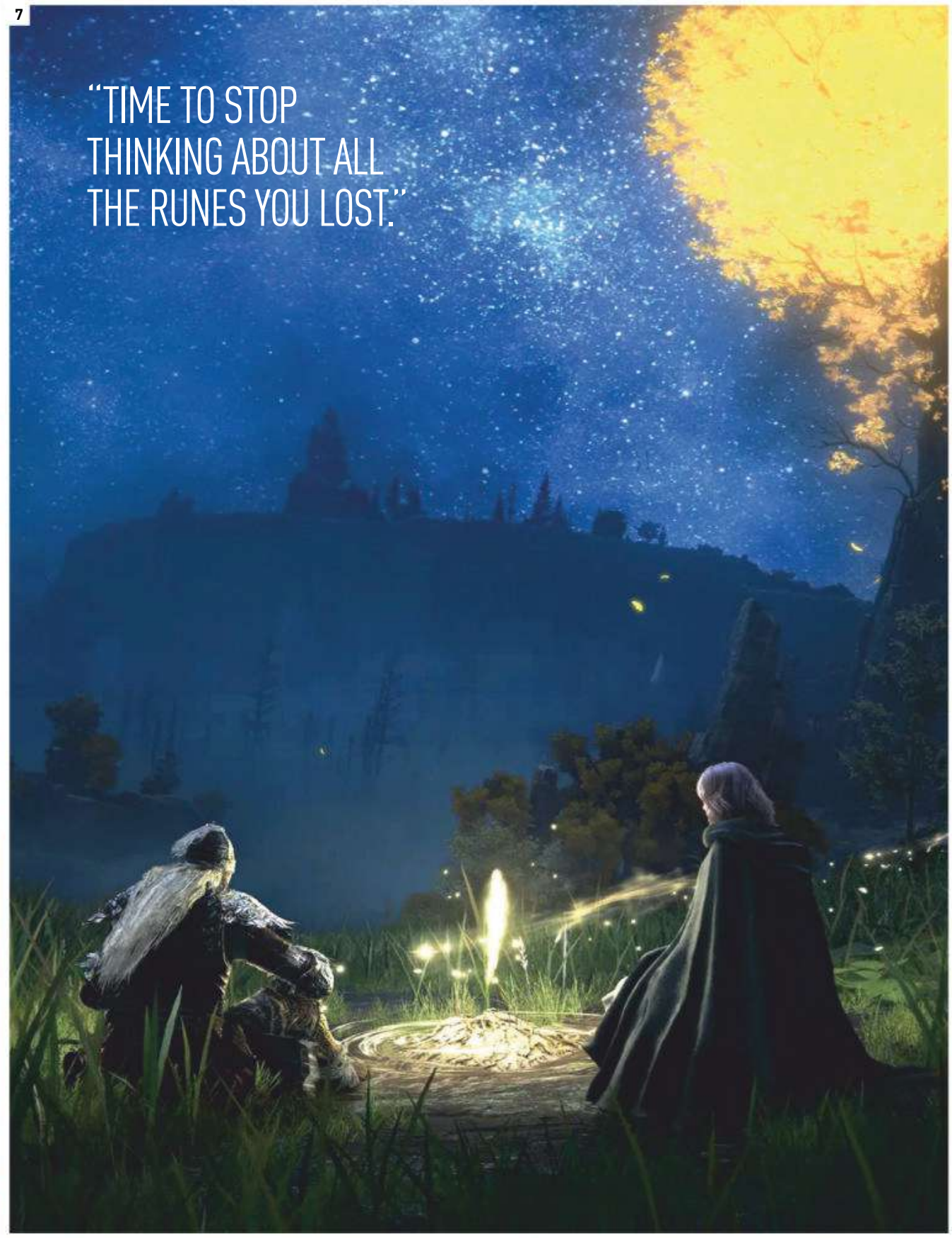

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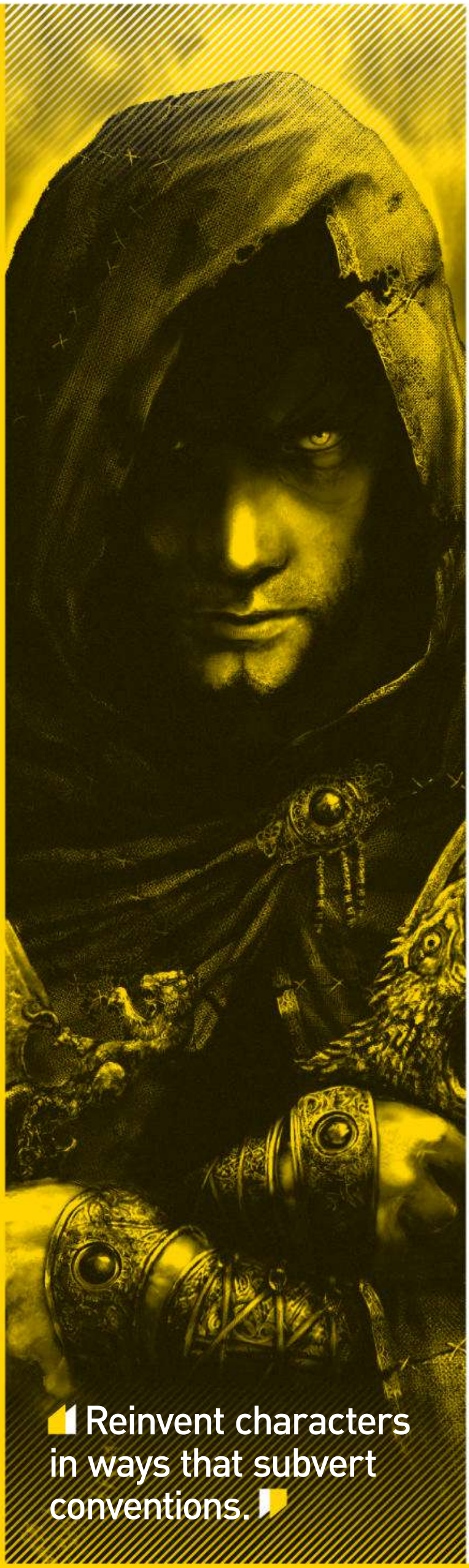

> Reinvent characters in ways that subvert conventions.

OPINION

"HELLO AGAIN, PRINCE OF PERSIA... LET'S SEE OTHER PAST HEROES REINVENTED."

There's life in classic characters, as long as they're given fresh twists

WRITER BIO
Ben Wilson is a freelance writer and author, whose next book sees Nathan Drake go one-on-one with the cast of Jurassic Park.

Everything in entertainment comes full circle eventually. Motown songs get sampled in contemporary hip-hop, Hollywood studios remake celluloid favourites from the 1980s and 1990s, and games are following suit, most recently with Prince Of Persia enjoying a comeback – with the prince as a side-character in the series bearing his name.

This move in Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown garnered a mixed reaction – some of which is understandable. We're talking about one of the most iconic characters of the 1990s and 2000s, reinvented as a dude in distress, requiring rescue from a gent with a King's Road hairstyle and 6am-in-the-gym physique. For those who played the original Apple II platformer, such choices border on blasphemous. Yet I was one of the them, and now I'm going against the grain to offer a resounding thumbs up.

Prince Of Persia isn't only royalty within the canon of his own series. He also deserves that tag as one of yesteryear's all-time greats, alongside Lara Croft, Solid Snake, Dante, and Agent 47. Time, however, hasn't always been kind to those favourites. The more games bearing the name Tomb Raider, or Metal Gear, or Devil May Cry, or Hitman we accrued, the more those characters' lofty legacies felt diluted. Over-saturation is a tough ailment to recover from.

The Lost Crown presents newcomer Sargon as its hero, on a quest to rescue the titular Prince.

That's not to say these legends should be put out to pasture. Retaining their names while attaching them to fresh stories and protagonists can keep series relevant for future generations. You'd have scoffed at the notion of Uncharted being focussed on someone other than Nathan Drake when the first three games in the series decimated all contemporaries. However, A Thief's End introduced compelling characters around Drake, such as brother Sam and mercenary Nadine, so effectively that the latter took on a key supporting role to Chloe Frazer as Drake was phased out completely for brilliant spin-off The Lost Legacy. It can be done.

FAMILY MATTERS

The Lost Crown adopts a family-friendly approach to exhuming Prince of Persia, but others don't have to follow that template. Lara's direct familial arc has been explored ad infinitum across both games and movies, which is partly why more recent tales feel watered down. But her aristocratic background keeps many doors open. How about a posh-but-petulant cousin who loses both parents in an air crash, is adopted by an older, wiser Lara, and follows in her relic-hunting footsteps? Or a Hitman game where you control a criminal syndicate boss and need to survive or even capture Agent 47 as he picks off lesser underlings?

There's a curious precedent here, set by a gaming and Hollywood hybrid. Back in 2006, Appaloosa Interactive created an adventure based on a true movie icon by flipping the dynamic of its original role. That game was Jaws Unleashed, and you got to roam the oceans as a great white, butting boats and chomping human chowder. A lazy story meant the novelty wore thin, but the principle was sound. Take a character you love – or love to hate – and reinvent them in ways that subvert conventions. The Lost Crown isn't to everyone's liking, yet still could turn out to be one of 2024's most important releases.

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Both Ellie and Kratos were thrust back into the headlines.

OPINION

"IF SONY WANTS TO GO BIG ON TRIPLE-A, ROGUELIKE UPDATES ARE THE ANSWER."

Big games need to stay in the limelight, but that's getting harder

WRITER BIO
Ali Jones watched his university roommate playing The Binding Of Isaac once, and has been hooked on roguelikes ever since.

Nowadays videogame budgets regularly stretch into the hundreds of millions of dollars. Development schedules can leave a studio's fans waiting half a decade or more for a new game. And if Sony wants to continue to invest in its massive, headline-grabbing, high-production-value juggernauts, it needs to offer something to fill the gaps between them.

Fortunately it seems to have already worked that out. January saw the release of the remaster of The Last Of Us Part II. While the need to remaster a game that's not yet four years old is subject for debate, Naughty Dog has offered a little something extra to sweeten the pot. No Return is a roguelike mode that takes the game's combat systems, repurposes its environments, and allows you to play as members of the supporting cast. Throw in some random elements, and Naughty Dog has created a pretty authentic permadeath mode.

Elsewhere in the PlayStation Studios pantheon, Sony Santa Monica has used a surprisingly similar tactic. In December God Of War Ragnarök's Valhalla update had its own roguelike mode added, complete with a narrative epilogue that provided a final chapter for Kratos' story. Whether it's a coincidence that both studios opted for the same genre for their anachronistic new game modes, I can't be sure. Either way, as a long-time roguelike fan of both games I'm not complaining. But whether Neil Druckmann and Cory Barlog are in cahoots or not, the result is clear: well after release, both Ellie and Kratos were thrust back into the headlines, with a new lease of life designed to bring players back – and to keep them coming back.

You might think it's a cheap option – but games this big are never cheap to make in the first place.

SECOND HELPINGS

None of this is entirely new; expansions have helped keep studio coffers full for decades. But it's Sony which seems to be investing more heavily in these new kinds of offerings: remasters, like those of The Last Of Us and Marvel's Spider-Man; entire mid-scope games, like Spider-Man: Miles Morales and Uncharted: The Lost Legacy; director's cuts, like those of Death Stranding and Ghost Of Tsushima; and now new, repeatable modes for series as all-important as The Last Of Us and God Of War. These games (increasingly the games that are tentpoles for PlayStation's whole brand) are given a burst of relevance when the series they're part of might otherwise spend years in limbo.

And if this is Sony's strategy, it's because it needs to be. Of all the major platforms, PlayStation seems most dependent on exactly the kind of high-value blockbuster that takes many years, and hundreds of millions of dollars, to make. For many years that's been a strategy that has thrust PlayStation exclusives to the forefront of Game Of The Year discussions, but when a project is as long and expensive as some of these, it only takes a single failure to spell potential doom for a studio. If Sony plans to shore itself against that fate, it'll be exactly these kinds of smaller, shorter, cheaper offerings that make up an ever-growing percentage of its output, offering a financial shield for its flagship series and ensuring that PlayStation's biggest games are never out of the spotlight for too long.

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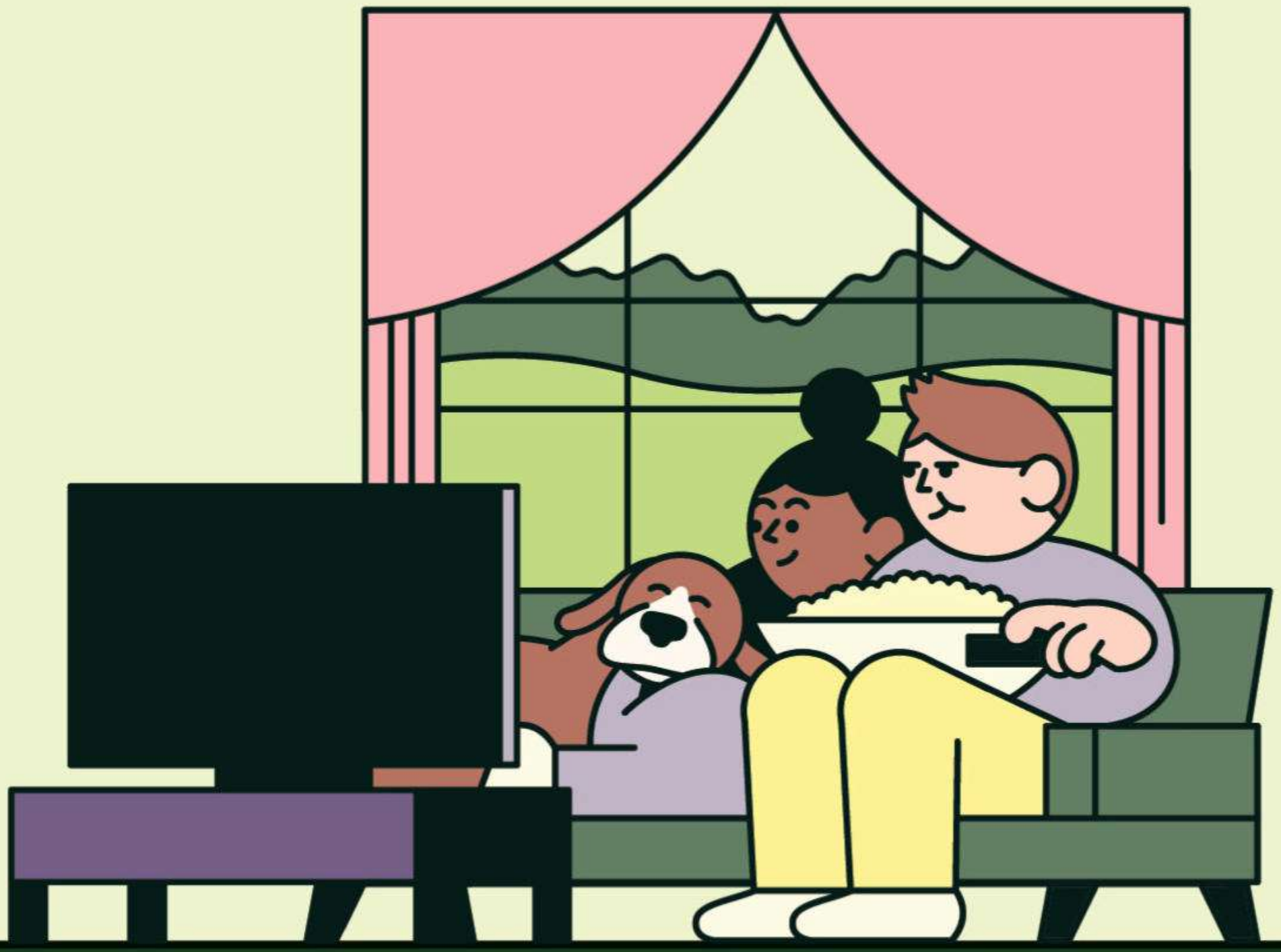

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Previews

"OL' GRIFFERS NEVER STOOD A CHANCE."

040 Dragon's Dogma 2

030 Rise Of The Ronin

Are you ready for the new age? Is it ready for *you*?

HIGHLIGHTS

HAROLD HALIBUT 026 | RISE OF THE RONIN 030
DAVE THE DIVER 032 | STILT 034 | UNTIL DAWN 035
NAIAD 036 | FREEDOM PLANET 2 038 | DRAGON'S DOGMA 2 040

The ship's flight deck is a sight to behold. The tiny buttons, knobs, and screens are a buffet of tiny details for your eyes to feast on.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** SLOW BROS
DEV SLOW BROS / **PLAYERS** 1

Harold Halibut

A home away from home

The science fiction genre always feels rather serious, which is why Harold Halibut is a breath of fresh air. Not that the residents of the space shuttle Fedora would know what that feels like, having been stuck in their city-sized spaceship at the bottom of an alien ocean for hundreds of years.

It may sound dire, but this underwater community is doing just fine. After leaving Earth on the brink of a cold war crisis, the hope was that the Fedora would find another planet for its human residents to inhabit, but the stars had other plans. The ship crash-landed on a watery planet and is now stuck in its depths. Flash forward 250 years and the community is still stranded, but life on the Fedora continues – and a shipwreck has never looked cosier.

However, a side-effect of catapulting humanity's last hope to a planet far from home is that these humans are a bit of an odd lot. Generations have passed, human attitudes have changed, and stories of Earth have been retold and retold until members of the current generation don't have much of a connection to their ancestors' place of birth. It's almost like a brain exercise to imagine what humans would be like after decades apart from Earth. The result is a small, insular community that happens to be incredibly quirky.

One particular weirdo is Harold, the Fedora's handyman and lab assistant to Dr Jeanne Mareaux, the ship's lead scientist. Mareaux is researching a way to unstick the ship and get it back into space, and has a shopping list of tasks for Harold to do. And she's not alone. It looks like most folks on the Fedora need Harold's help in some way, so our intergalactic handyman has his work cut out for him. Playing as Harold you'll be exploring the ship, solving puzzles, and completing unusual fetch quests for your fellow Fedorians.

FACTRICK

1. NAUTICAL

The Harold Halibut demo has already made a splash at festivals including Tribeca, Slamdance, and A Maze.

2. CHARACTER

All the characters aboard the Fedora are fully voice-acted, bringing the clay creations wonderfully to life.

3. COUNTDOWN

Slow Bros was founded in 2015, meaning it's been working on Harold Halibut just shy of a decade.

PLASTICINE DREAM

Developer Slow Bros has been working on Harold Halibut for around a decade now, and that dedication can be seen in the game's incredible craftsmanship. Slow Bros has used a combination of motion capture and 3D animation software to create this underwater society, but that still means everything you see on screen has been made by hand. It's an absolute treat to drink in all the retro-futuristic details on the Fedora. The painterly brushstrokes on shop signs, every detailed cereal box, jam jar, and tin can on the general store's shelf, the faded floorboards, and peeling wallpaper – it's all awesome. Spotting a delicate row of thread carefully stitched into a character's jumper is a wonderful highlight during our time with the game.

The controls, on the other hand, can be a little clumsy as Harold often gets

TRACK RECORD Slow Bros is both developer and publisher, and Harold Halibut is its debut game. The team come from a variety of backgrounds including videogame production, filmmaking, carpentry, apparel, and illustration.

1

» stuck in doorways and caught on bits of scenery, though exploring the spaceship remains a real treat. That goes for meeting the locals too. There's Slippie, who somehow manages to be the owner of a winter clothing store on a spaceship with no changes in climate. Then there are the three ship stewards and identical brothers Secretary 8, 17, and 24, who are keen to help out but refuse to talk about their mysterious long-lost brother Warren. Fedora's mayor is a tough nut but also a sight to behold, her business suit with incredibly square shoulder pads accentuating her equally square hairstyle.

Harold is also a lovable oddball. He talks to himself, cracks jokes only he understands, and draws silly doodles in his notebook. It's like he's in his own little world, within this little world. He's already keen to help the residents of the ship with their problems, but, being a pushover, he also often gets roped into their shenanigans. He's comfortable with his life on the ship, but he can't help but feel curious about what else lies beyond the bubble of the Fedora.

UNDER THE SEA

Harold's internal dichotomy begins to surface following a strange coincidence. At the end of the game's first chapter, the ship receives a message. It turns out that the inhabitants of Earth managed to sort themselves out after all, and the Fedora and its occupants are welcome to return home. Suddenly this community is faced with some important decisions. After spending their entire lives only ever knowing the inside of this sunken vessel, do they want to make the trip back to a world they no longer share a connection with? And if they do, there's a practical consideration: how do they get the ship unstuck?

We've seen hints at what's to come for these submerged citizens. There are shocking scientific discoveries, strange planets to explore, and even alien encounters in Harold's future. Slow Bros says that Harold Halibut will explore themes of love, family, community, and the true meaning of 'home.' It sounds like this humble handyman is about to stumble into a grand adventure – and we're going on it with him.

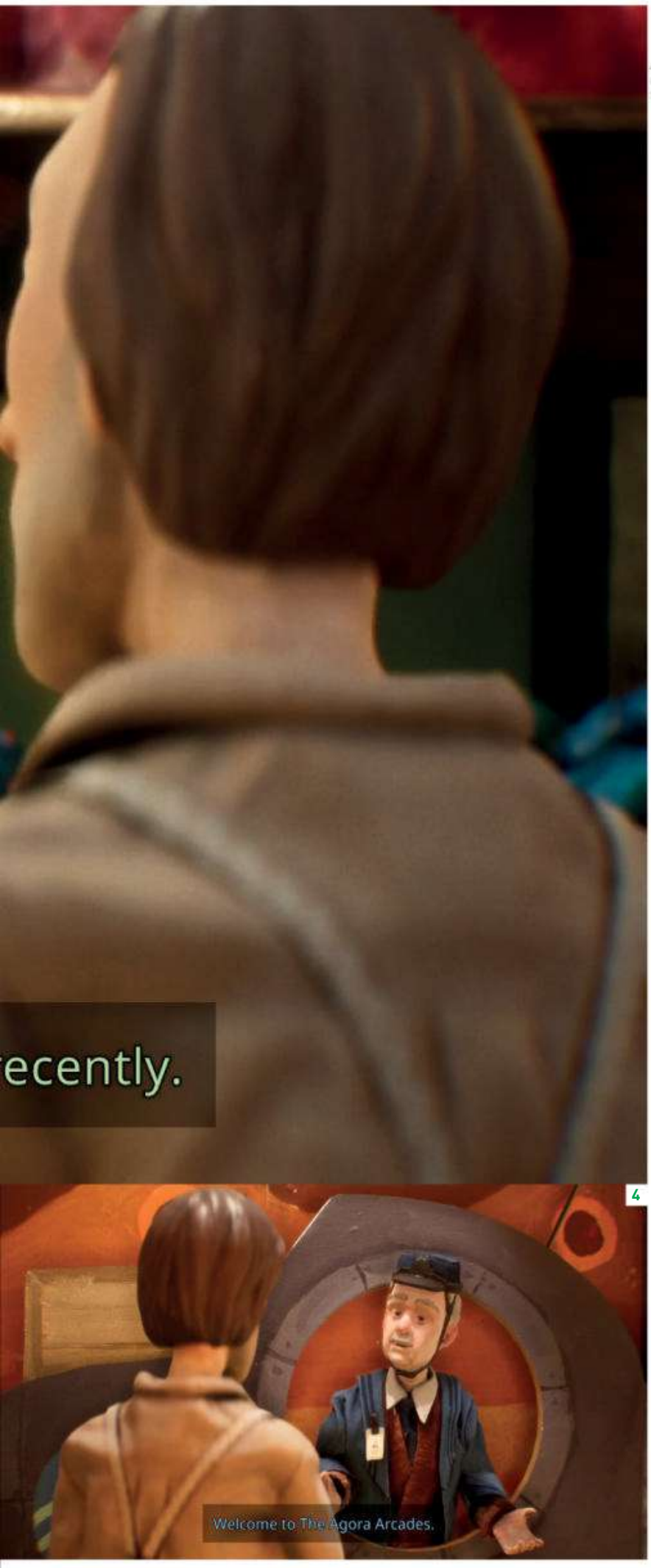
IMPRESSIONS

If Wes Anderson made a stop-motion sci-fi film, it would look a little like this. The controls may be a little clunky but it's not enough to steal our attention from this beautifully crafted project.

2

3

1 Conversations with the locals cover offbeat topics, such as the taste buds of fish. When you're stuck beneath the sea, you probably *do* think a lot about fish. 2 Those are some nice doodles, but you'd better stick to your day job, Harold. 3 Knowing there's only a few inches of glass between you and an alien ocean is scary. 4 Seeing the claymation characters up close is always fun, and you'll marvel at the little details.



Reflecting on the concept of 'home' is a big part of the game.

"SUDDENLY THE COMMUNITY IS FACED WITH SOME IMPORTANT DECISIONS."

Below deck

Take a tour through the Fedora's halls

01

Microwave your cold coffee and eat your cheese sandwich as you watch the fish swim by in the science lab's rec room. This is the life, right?

02

The botanical lab is a colourful garden full of alien flora. Feel free to take a sniff, but don't get too close. These aren't your common-or-garden daisies.

03

Harold's basement bedroom might be a bit dark and dreary, with a rather uncomfortable-looking bed, but it's a small slice of the ship that's truly his.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 22 MAR / **PUB** SONY / **DEV** TEAM NINJA, XDEV / **PLAYERS** 1

Rise Of The Ronin

Pulling history closer than ever before

Past and future, brother and sister, East and West – how each of these pairs picks a path forward, between 'unity' and 'conflict,' weaves through the heart of Team Ninja's most ambitious project to date. You take to a loosely historical stage as the titular ronin, a warrior without a prestigious lord to answer to, and therefore left to bear the responsibility for your choices alone.

It wasn't always like this; you were trained from a young age to serve as one half of a pair by a clandestine group known as the Veiled Edge. However, during a tumultuous era, you're separated from your 'Blade Twin' for the first time. Whether this ushers in an Assassin's-Creed-Odyssey-style choice of protagonists remains to be seen, but it seems likely conflict will drive you together once more.

The game's set in 1863, during the final years of the Edo period, as the power of the militaristic and feudal Tokugawa Shogunate is failing. The Shogunate's isolationist foreign policy ended after the ships helmed by American naval officer Matthew C Perry made landfall years earlier, influence from the West ushering in both new ways to wage war and disease. This time is known as the 'Bakumatsu' period, and is too complicated to sum up in a few sentences – but that's what makes it a time that's compelling to explore.

FACTRICK

1. CLOSE TO HOME

Koei Tecmo has offices in Yokohama, Edo, and Kyoto, partially informing the choice to include these cities.

2. NOTES TO FOLLOW

Inon Zur is composer, known for his soundtrack work on the Dragon Age, Fallout, and Syberia series.

3. PLAYING TO TYPE

Keishi Otomo, known for a number of the Rurouni Kenshin live-action films has contributed to the game.

RHYTHM OF THE KNIFE

Granted, with conflict already rife within and without Japan, you'll explore much of this open world through combat. There's a familiar soulslike sensibility, requiring you study your foe's behaviour before striking. You'll cling to life by parrying and cutting through combatants, but your arsenal isn't limited to the blade.

Acquiring some weapons isn't so much a matter of what you know as *who* you know. For example, you have to decide whether to ignore it or intervene when an inventor known as Igashichi is hassled by a group of guards. Getting to know Igashichi unlocks more quests, plus the Fire Pipe, a long-range weapon that acts much like a modern flamethrower. It's good for smoking out bandits, barbecue-style.

Playing keep-away with the Fire Pipe is just one option in a fight; you can light up your own sword for a literal flaming edge in battle or even combine long-range blasts with short-range pokes with a bayonet. Western-made firearms open up your death-dealing options significantly, though survival is never a simple case of 'point and shoot.'

> "WITH CONFLICT RIFE, YOU'LL EXPLORE MUCH OF THIS WORLD THROUGH COMBAT."

RIPPING GOOD YARN

Though speaking of the direct approach, now seems a good time to talk about your grappling rope. Primarily a traversal tool that'll allow you to run across roofs or get a bit of air before deploying your glider, your grappling rope can be essential to stealth. Whether you're getting into position before delivering death from above or using the rope to pull enemies into a razor-edged embrace, it's just one facet of this action RPG's heightened reality.

Though drawing heavily from history, the developers are indulging in the occasional flight of fancy – literally. Your glider, known as the Avicula, obviously pushes the boundaries of the historical setting, especially as you can dismount gracefully from the air straight onto horseback. That said, even this glider design is based on a blueprint crafted by real-world gunsmith and builder of Japan's first reflective telescope Ikkansai Kunitomo.

Gliding is essential to taking in Bakumatsu Japan. East mingles with West in Yokohama's Kannai district, location of both the US consulate and Chinatown. At Yokohama's outskirts, beyond the brothels and guest houses, lies another symbol of the tie between Japan's past and future: the Tokaido road, linking Kyoto, the imperial capital, to Edo, the Shogunate's seat of power. Though these powerful forces pull away from one another, they will together sew another stitch in the tapestry of Japan's history – and you may just be their needle.

IMPRESSIONS

This open world action RPG presents a heightened retelling of an intensely interesting period in Japan's history. We can't wait to dive in, blades and perhaps more at the ready.

TRACK RECORD After 2023's Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty, 2022's Stranger Of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin, and 2020's Nioh 2, this is the first Team Ninja title in some time to be without supernatural or fantastical elements (that glider aside).

4 There's a lot of ground to cover in this open world, and your horse is just one invaluable ally on the long road ahead. 5 Yokohama in the 1860s is brought to gorgeous life, whether you're among the people or scurrying through the shadows across rooftops. 6 The grappling rope has utility beyond mere traversal, dealing a healthy dose of stealthy surprise when creatively deployed.

1 In addition to carrying out favours for your allies, there's also shooting practice, collecting cats, horseback archery, and much more to get stuck into. 2 Building bonds is vital. Save Igashichi's skin here and the inventor can offer a fair few additions to your arsenal. 3 Crossing blades is inevitable. Study your opponent's moves before going in for the kill.

Swim close to the surface and the sea will be bright and colourful, but fish smaller.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** APRIL / **PUB** MINTROCKET / **DEV** MINTROCKET / **PLAYERS** 1

Dave The Diver

Eating with the fishes

There's one thing you need to know about Dave: he loves to dive. He's also friendly and warm to a fault, making him oblivious to the possible villainy of some of his friends, and unable to say no to their requests. Enter Cobra, a Hawaiian-shirt-wearing big shot who's quite possibly a Bond villain, and who wants you to help him explore the mysterious Blue Hole.

These depths are, to put it in game terms, procedurally generated, changing every day to pull in bits from all oceans across the globe. Which means for the right entrepreneur you have the majesty of the seven seas in one must-visit destination. As it stands now, Cobra still needs you to learn how it works, plumbing the depths for evidence of sea monsters and mysterious undersea civilisations, all while capturing fish for the only current attraction: a sushi restaurant that aims to serve every type of fish in new, wondrous configurations.

FACTRICK

1. ON THE HOOK

The DualSense's haptics mean you'll feel the tension of a fish caught on the end of your harpoon.

2. SEAHORSE POWER

Dave The Diver gradually takes new and surprising directions as you progress, including seahorse racing.

3. DREDGED UP

The PC release features free DLC that crosses over with indie fisher Dredge. We hope to see it on PlayStation.

HOT SPOT

Along the way, the Blue Hole attracts increasing numbers of visitors, all with something to ask of Dave as he makes his dangerous expeditions, from rescuing sunken anime figures in exchange for crafting more gear to saving poor, beleaguered dolphins from poachers.

Which means an awful lot of diving. While fishing is quick and snappy as you're given twin-stick control of a harpoon and/or gun, the way your exploring unfolds is reminiscent of more meditative fishing. You poke and prod at the Blue Hole over time, slowly accruing upgrades and unlocking further areas.

Our time with the game is slow, repetitive, and, dare we say, downright pleasant. This isn't a game you'll want to blaze through, but one to revisit over time as you dive a little deeper each time, stuffing new fish into your pockets, and making more friends.

Accompanying the diving is a surprisingly in-depth sushi management game. What begins as a spin on Diner Dash in which you deliver the correct orders gets deeper as you tweak and upgrade the menu based on the fish you've caught during the day, hire more staff, and unlock items that require little minigames to deliver (pour the green tea perfectly to get a nice tip).

Dave's plunges are really easy to soak in, as the simple pleasure that comes from exploring, fishing, and serving sushi keeps pushing you overboard for one more swim.

IMPRESSIONS

Relaxing (until you get targeted by a shark, that is) yet finely polished, Dave The Diver is shaping up to be a slower-paced adventure that'll keep you coming back to its big hole for more.

TRACK RECORD A division of huge Korean company Nexon, Mintrocket is making its debut with Dave The Diver. The studio's goal is to focus on the "essence of fun" and create smaller-scope games inspired by indies (though Mintrocket is decidedly not indie itself).

1

2

1 There's more to the sushi portion of the game than first appears. It gets quite *ahem* deep. 2 A free Godzilla update in May will see the monster arrive at the Blue Hole. 3 Heaps of delightful custom animations make Dave The Diver a slick production indeed. 4 Dangerous fishies and even boss battles lurk in the depths. Load up on guns.

Dave in the life

How you spend each day in the Blue Hole

01

After breakfast, your Bond-villain-like pal Cobra will take you out to sea for your first plunge to gather fish and treasures alike. Explore!

02

In the afternoon, you get a second go at an area sporting the same layout. Found a good spot or stuff you didn't have room for before? Go back and get it.

03

In the evening, treat yourself to some sushi. Or work at your sushi restaurant, anyway. Manage staff and the menu, and run plates to earn cash.

These boots are made for more than just bouncing – try grappling, gliding, and fighting.

FORMAT PSVR2 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** VRKIWI / **DEV** REKT GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Stilt

Just a hop, skip, and a jump in VR

Here's hoping you don't suffer from motion sickness for this one. This VR platformer takes place entirely within a first-person view, and the game has you hurling yourself from ledge to ledge and beyond – though hopefully not in ways that will necessitate a deep clean of your headset.

No doubt inspired by the silly charm of many classic platformers, you play as a small furry creature with spring-loaded stilts strapped to your locomotive appendages. (Are they legs? Are they arms? Perhaps they're a little bit of both.) Your spaceship has been stolen by a grabby giant octopus perched atop a volcano, and your ridiculous footwear (gloves?) represents the only way you can take back what was snatched from you.

"GALLOP ACROSS LEVELS LIKE THE MAJESTIC WEIRDO YOU ARE."

WHEN THEY SAY 'JUMP...'

By pumping your arms while holding the Sense controllers, you'll lob yourself through a colourful collectathon, snaffling cogwheels and... stamps? We doubt posting the octopus a piece of your mind or a strongly worded missive regarding the importance of sharing is quite going to sort this one out.

Motion sickness notwithstanding, movement is a joy. In addition to being able to gallop across levels like the majestic weirdo you are, your nonstandard traversal gear is equipped with a grapple, allowing you to zip through the air as well. A teeny-tiny propeller can even pop out of the sole of your bouncy boots, letting you glide for a short distance too – or you can simply drop out of the sky and leverage your terminal velocity for a full-force bounce. But your springy stilts aren't just good for getting around, they're fully capable of delivering a swift bonk to the head of any fighty foe determined to slow you down. Definitely silly, sometimes slapstick, it's hard to dislike this platforming leap for joy.

IMPRESSIONS

Colourful and often silly, this platformer leaves us grinning. We just hope it won't make motion sickness sufferers queasy.

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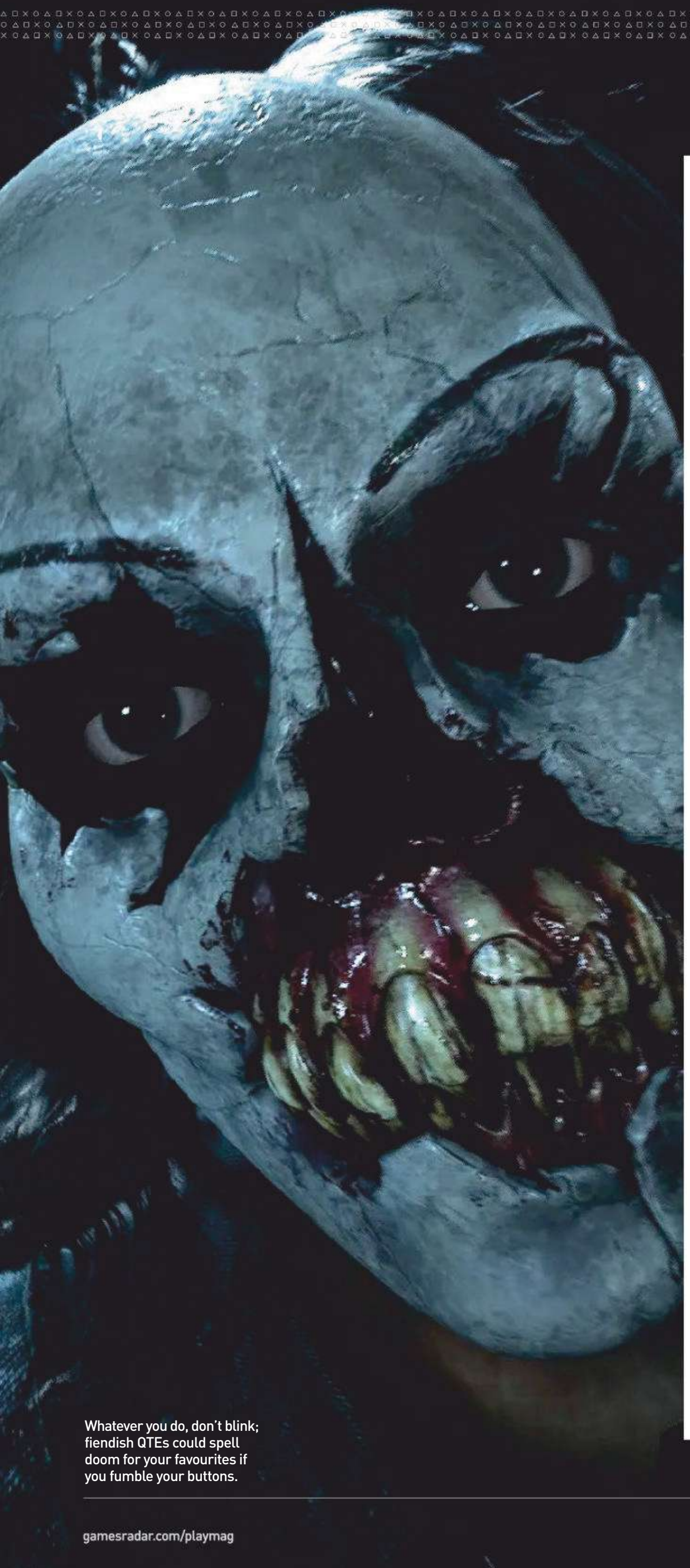
1 Don't be afraid to give critters a spring-loaded bonk on the head when you need a bit of personal space. 2 Levels are bright, seasidey strolls, littered with collectibles.



Whatever you do, don't blink; fiendish QTEs could spell doom for your favourites if you fumble your buttons.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** SONY
DEV BALLISTIC MOON / **PLAYERS** 1

Until Dawn

The teen slasher strikes again

Not ten years since its original launch, Supermassive Games' first teen slasher romp is being remastered. In it, a year after a mean-spirited prank went horrifically wrong, a group of chums reunite at the isolated mountainside scene of the crime – uh, we mean where it all first went downhill. But a killer lurks among their crew, and one way or another the truth will come tumbling out.

What follows is the same death-by-many-branching-choices activity that has since become Supermassive's bread and butter, though new development talent takes centre stage here. It's the first project from Ballistic Moon; the Surrey-based outfit boasts former Supermassive talent and is pulling out all the stops to bring this monster back to life.

The game's being rebuilt in Unreal Engine 5, making visual improvements possible, including a more varied cinematic colour palette, improved character animation based on the original motion-capture data, and a third-person camera enabling you not only to enjoy extra detail, but to explore new locations.

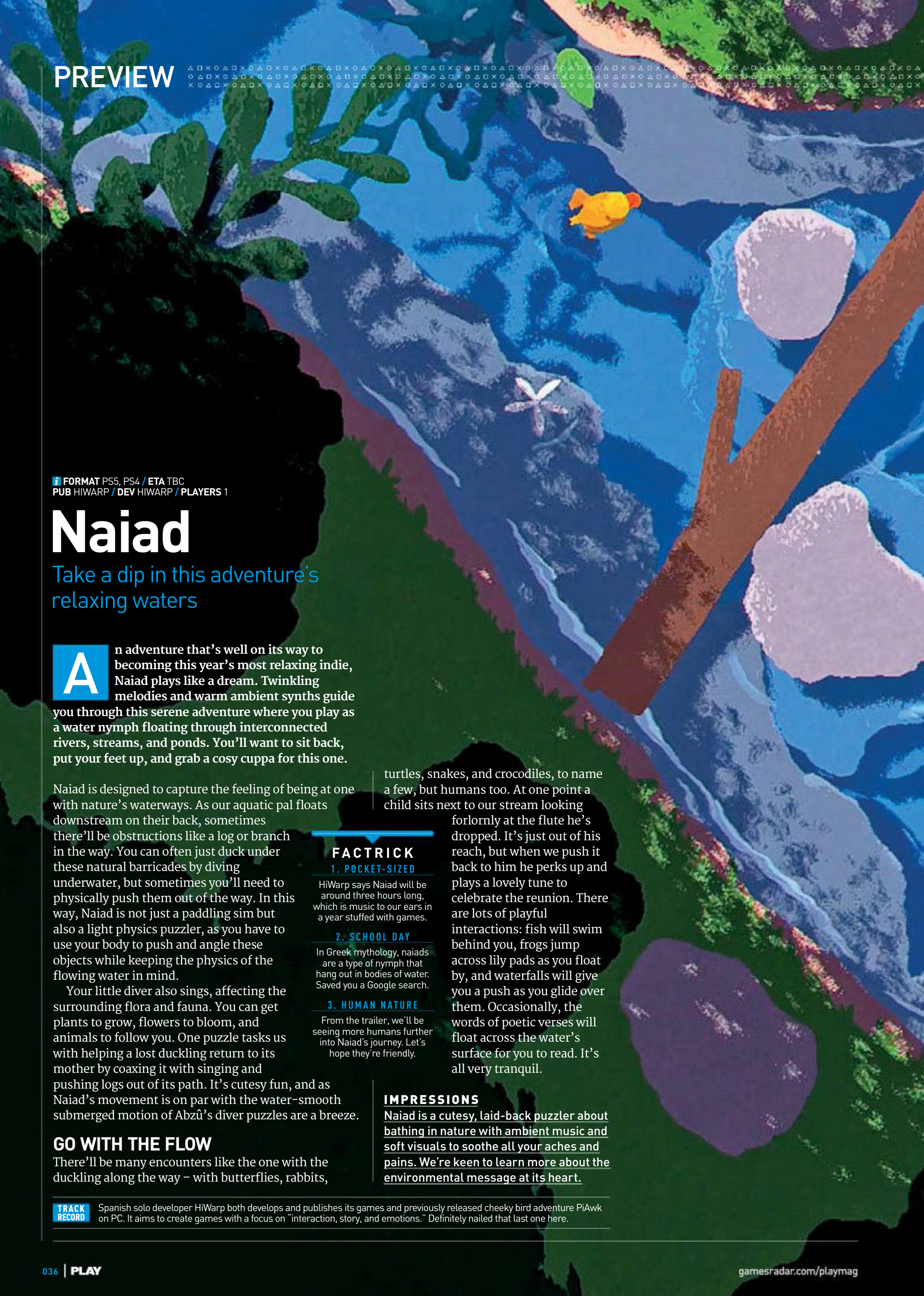
A NEW DAWN

The new environments will feature more collectables and interactions, though that's not to say this redo will stray too far from the original story. Many twists and turns remain intact, though this revisit takes the opportunity to expand on some emotional beats, exploring them in more depth here. Backing up this deeper delving is a score from composer Mark Korven, whose work you will have heard before in horror flicks The Lighthouse, The Witch, and The Black Phone [*Sounds like a messed-up lost novel by CS Lewis* – ed]. Getting chased through those mines is bound to be a whole new stratosphere of stressful.

IMPRESSIONS

While we rarely say 'no' to a graphical upgrade, we didn't expect to see this slasher resurrected quite so soon. Still, we're looking forward to this frightfest.

The tale of terror you remember remains largely intact, though this remaster digs deep to bring more detail to the surface.



FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** TBC
PUB HIWARP / **DEV** HIWARP / **PLAYERS** 1

Naiad

Take a dip in this adventure's relaxing waters

An adventure that's well on its way to becoming this year's most relaxing indie, Naiad plays like a dream. Twinkling melodies and warm ambient synths guide you through this serene adventure where you play as a water nymph floating through interconnected rivers, streams, and ponds. You'll want to sit back, put your feet up, and grab a cosy cuppa for this one.

Naiad is designed to capture the feeling of being at one with nature's waterways. As our aquatic pal floats downstream on their back, sometimes there'll be obstructions like a log or branch in the way. You can often just duck under these natural barricades by diving underwater, but sometimes you'll need to physically push them out of the way. In this way, Naiad is not just a paddling sim but also a light physics puzzler, as you have to use your body to push and angle these objects while keeping the physics of the flowing water in mind.

Your little diver also sings, affecting the surrounding flora and fauna. You can get plants to grow, flowers to bloom, and animals to follow you. One puzzle tasks us with helping a lost duckling return to its mother by coaxing it with singing and pushing logs out of its path. It's cutesy fun, and as Naiad's movement is on par with the water-smooth submerged motion of Abzû's diver puzzles are a breeze.

FACTRICK

1. POCKET-SIZED

HiWarp says Naiad will be around three hours long, which is music to our ears in a year stuffed with games.

2. SCHOOL DAY

In Greek mythology, naiads are a type of nymph that hang out in bodies of water. Saved you a Google search.

3. HUMAN NATURE

From the trailer, we'll be seeing more humans further into Naiad's journey. Let's hope they're friendly.

GO WITH THE FLOW

There'll be many encounters like the one with the duckling along the way – with butterflies, rabbits, turtles, snakes, and crocodiles, to name a few, but humans too. At one point a child sits next to our stream looking forlornly at the flute he's dropped. It's just out of his reach, but when we push it back to him he perks up and plays a lovely tune to celebrate the reunion. There are lots of playful interactions: fish will swim behind you, frogs jump across lily pads as you float by, and waterfalls will give you a push as you glide over them. Occasionally, the words of poetic verses will float across the water's surface for you to read. It's all very tranquil.

IMPRESSIONS

Naiad is a cutesy, laid-back puzzler about bathing in nature with ambient music and soft visuals to soothe all your aches and pains. We're keen to learn more about the environmental message at its heart.

TRACK RECORD Spanish solo developer HiWarp both develops and publishes its games and previously released cheeky bird adventure PiAwk on PC. It aims to create games with a focus on "interaction, story, and emotions." Definitely nailed that last one here.

"TWINKLING MELODIES AND WARM AMBIENT SYNTHS GUIDE YOU THROUGH THIS SERENE ADVENTURE."

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 4 APR / **PUB** MARVELOUS EUROPE / **DEV** GALAXYTRAIL / **PLAYERS** 1

Freedom Planet 2

Gotta come to PlayStation fast

There aren't many modern games that copy Sonic The Hedgehog's 2D platforming template, which is odd considering how popular those games remain. That's especially true on PlayStation, where we haven't even had the other indie hoglike Spark The Electric Jester. Freedom Planet is our closest alternative to classic Sonic, and its sequel is finally heading to the big white obelisk after a successful stint on PC, anthropomorphised animals and all.

At first glance, it does look like a ripoff of Sega's flagship platformer, complete with loops, ramps, mid-air collectibles, and even pinball flippers, but it ends up playing very differently thanks to its emphasis on combat and screen-filling boss battles. You get to play as one of its four female leads (a water dragon, a wildcat, a hound, and now a panda too), all of whom are voiced well, with a great deal of personality. NPC dialogue is properly laugh-out-loud funny at some points, though the story tackles some big subjects like a recent genocide of the water dragons, which has left Lilac and chief antagonist Merga as the last of their kind. Merga's hell-bent on revenge for her people and is recruiting other animals left, right, and centre to fight for her cause. Add in a self-centred mayor, the enigmatic 'Magister' who presides over the people of Shang Tu, and an equivalent to Ratchet & Clank's Captain Quark in the shape of Captain Calaw (pronounced 'cal-aow'), and you've got loads of inter-character relationships deftly handled by the writing team.

The result is that there's a lot more exposition than you might expect, with deep conversations in cutscenes and even banter during stages. The fact the characters are animals is only really used for some dad jokes, and it's all played pretty straight – this isn't a game about fan service. In fact, the main story wouldn't be amiss in a Square Enix RPG.

FACTRICK

1. SONIC BOOM

The original Freedom Planet began as a Sonic fan game by Sabrina DiDuro, founder of dev studio GalaxyTrail.

2. WATER HOG

Lead character Sash Lilac therefore started life as a hedgehog, before becoming a water dragon.

3. ZOOM ZOOM

Playable character Milla was originally intended to die in the first game, but... didn't. That would have been harsh.

RETRO REVIVAL

In action, however, basically every good idea from 2D platforming's past has been cherry-picked, and older (or well-versed) gamers will enjoy the way Lilac's Dragon Boost looks like Sparkster's air dash from Konami's 1993 Rocket Knight Adventures, or appreciate the nods to Gunstar Future Heroes and Fantasy Zone. There's even a playable '80s-style arcade game called 'Fists Of Frog' to find – it's as tough as Pac-Man and its ilk, but just as moreish.

Freedom Planet 2 also has ideas of its own, such as the option before tackling a level to buy and assign items which make the game easier or harder and only affect your skill grade at the end. Replay value skyrockets with such grading, and it's also speedrun-friendly with record times displayed and saved. Very cool.

Visually it looks like a lost Sega 32X game with its bright colours and scaled/rotated sprites, mixed with mid-'90s Capcom pixel art with a splash of vintage Sonic Team enemy design for good measure. There's a ton of visual detail everywhere you look, especially in the slow-paced hub areas, and the depth of the lore is impressive. At some 12 hours for a first playthrough (30 levels), it's way longer than the classic games it was inspired by, but keeps its pace throughout. And while some key characters return and previous events are frequently referenced, you don't need to know what happened in the original Freedom Planet to work out what's going on. Phew!

The PlayStation version introduces the 'boss rush' mode in which you can take on the bosses in sequence in two sets, which is going to take some skill if you want to do them all on one life. Also, PS4 and PS5 versions will be included in the price so you only have to buy it once. The PC version has been out since September 2022 and has had a healthy history of updates, so it should be bug-free and ready for us to enjoy in its best incarnation yet. You can bet your cartridges we'll be back to blow our way through a review when the full thing spins up.

> "BASICALLY EVERY GOOD IDEA FROM 2D PLATFORMING'S PAST HAS BEEN CHERRY-PICKED."

IMPRESSIONS

This big, flashy, story-rich action platformer would have been a huge hit in the early 1990s. More its own game than a mere Sonic clone, this sequel's set to impress on PlayStation.

TRACK RECORD Aside from the original Freedom Planet, indie studio GalaxyTrail also made PS4 action-puzzler Petal Crash, as well as Grapple Force Rena, a PC game built around a grappling hook and object manipulation.

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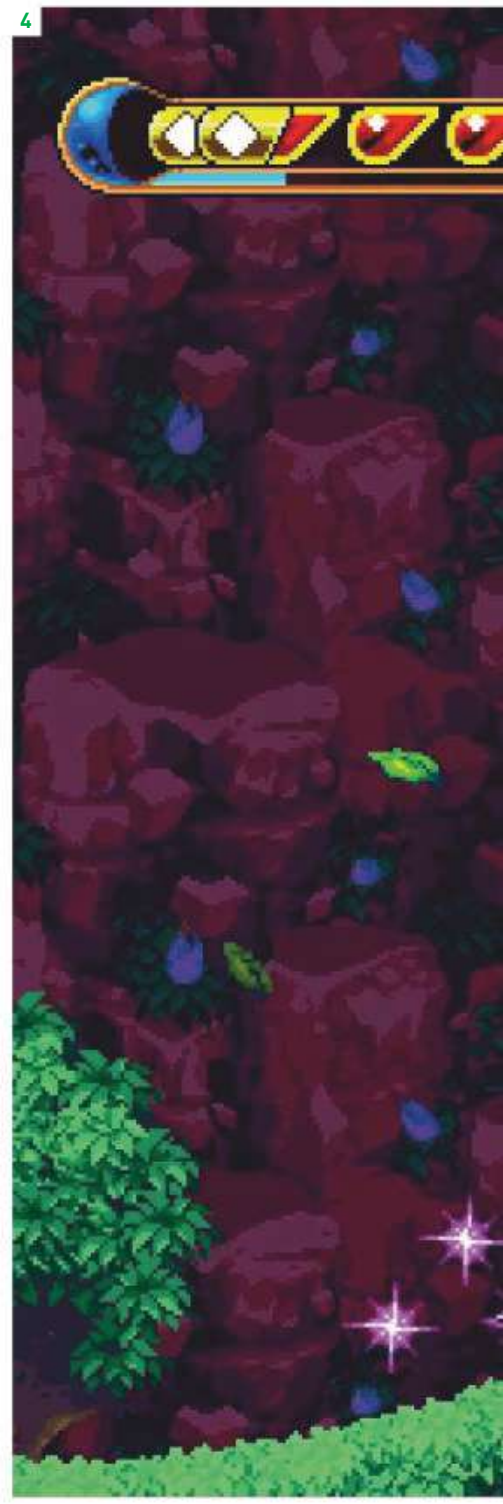


4 Sash Lilac the water dragon in full flow. Holding ◎ will grant you this speed boost with a prolonged moment of invulnerability. 5 The game has plenty of pools of water so you can show off by running over its surface. Looks familiar... 6 Neera Li the panda is the newly playable character. Wildcat ally Carol always calls her 'Scary Lady'.

2

3

1 In Adventure mode, minor NPCs' dialogue is text-only, but cutscenes like this are fully voiced. 2 After finding a fuel can, Carol the wildcat can get her motorbike out at any time. 3 The bosses are all imaginative, so the new boss rush mode should be quite the spectacle when played with skill.

5

6

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 22 MAR **/ PUB** CAPCOM **/ DEV** CAPCOM **/ PLAYERS** 1

Dragon's Dogma 2

All fired up and ready to go

We only review finished games, so in Viewpoint we go hands-on with near-final code of a game that just missed our review deadline. Oscar Taylor-Kent is living his best life, teaching a troublesome griffin not to stick its beak into his business.

Remember the griffin we chased across the map in our PLAY #33 preview? We're happy to report: we've had our revenge. After taking up the Magick Archer vocation, our first steps into Batthal, home to the Beastren, see us batted around by armoured goblins, harpies, and then the big beastie itself.

While our party of pawns is helpful, our Arisen-specific character class is what really counts here. Holding R1, aiming with the bow is arcade-like rather than truly down-sights, a circle appearing on screen in which you lock on several shots before releasing. Hitting △ toggles between a wide or constricted circle, meaning you can take on larger groups all at once or focus on just one target.

And that's only the start of our magickal toolkit. When one pawn is batted off a cliff to go splat, we needn't run down to help them back to their feet as a revival arrow can get the job done from a distance. Meanwhile, we can control a flaming explosive arrow mid-flight before it goes boom. Ol' griffers never stood a chance this time around.

Nearby, a pawn spots a cave entrance, not only telling us about it but marking it on the map (different pawns specialise in telling you about different points of interest). A green glowing ore takes our interest until, as we approach it, it dulls. We have to switch off any lanterns and stow our glowing bow in order to harvest crystals that retain the glow. The trouble is, not being able to see in a cave infested with monsters presents another problem: their glowing red eyes are the only warning we get before they jump out at us. Then we see a pair of eyes bigger than the rest, and a health bar with multiple layers suddenly appears at the top of the screen – the crystals have led us to a minotaur's lair. Even with a new trick up our sleeve (ricochet arrows that, when used in a cave, create a devastating whirlwind of pointy bits) it's a tough fight. Escaping with our pockets jangling and returning to the city from which we began, we discover these crystals are vital for a story quest. Stuff you stumble on will frequently be important, or at the very least reward you with goodies.

HODGEPODGE RODGE

Jumping into a slightly earlier point in the game to experiment with the Mystic Spearhand vocation, we enter a village only to be beset by citizens asking for help. Rather than having to find people to give you quests, it's more common this time around for the people to come to you, which is both handy and makes a lot more sense. Why wait for the adventurer in town to ask about your problems?

But when we're asked to find Rodge, a boy who's wandered out of town, we're hit with a timer icon in the quest log. This little lad is in danger, and it's happening right now. Dawdle and you'll be bringing home rags and bones. The quest log also indicates which pawns you've recruited who have prior knowledge of the quests as well, having perhaps undertaken them with the player that created them.

After a pawn prompts us to ask around, we discover Rodge has been picking flowers that glow by night in order to help out a medicine maker. Tracking him would be easier if we wait for nightfall, then, but more perils await in the dark both for us and Rodge. Following the flowers, we're beset by skeletons and a kind of lich thing. Torn between whether to run away to get to Rodge quicker or fight, the sheer number of undead forces us to make a stand. Fortunately the Devil-May-Cry-like Mystic Spearhand has more than few cool moves to make short work of foes, including a slo-mo-inducing ranged blast that can be charged with R1. Once it connects, we can perform a well-timed button press to extend the move – ⊗ to warp ourselves to the enemy where we can begin to grapple with them, or R1 again to chain blasts around them. With more combos galore, melee fighters will love what the mystic spearhand can do.

It's tight, but we win, having to run past a beefy ogre and some wolves to make sure we get to Rodge in time, as he's being attacked in the back of a cave. Depositing him back home after a lengthy trek back (and fending off some saurian lizardmen in the process), we strike out for new adventures north of the village.

An ancient battleground? What could possibly go wrong? Ah, the large creatures we fought before weren't that large after all, as we come upon a properly giant orc battling a massive wyvern. Getting closer, the wyvern sniffs out our dragon-induced Arisen condition, and a five-bar-long health appears on the screen. Needless to say, we're quickly burned. But we'll be back for round two soon enough.

VIEWPOINT

"A HUGE WORLD THAT'S REWARDING TO EXPLORE AT YOUR OWN PACE, AND COMBAT CLASSES JUST AS DEEP. THIS COULD BE A MASTERCLASS IN OPEN WORLD DESIGN."

We'll have our full review of Dragon's Dogma 2 in a future issue.

1 What's better than one arrow? Several. And they're magic. And I can imbue them with special powers. And I can lock-on. And I can... **2** What if 'slow and considered combat' only applied to enemies? The Mystic Spearhand can slow foes to a crawl, then dash about with lightning-quick strikes. **3** Even small enemies can get the drop on you if you're not careful. Pick your fights. **4** The arid region around Batthal, home to the Beastren, is full of secrets. There's loads to find out of the way, and it makes a great change of pace from the forests near where you start.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** SUMMER 2024 / **PUB** SQUARE ENIX
DEV SQUARE ENIX CREATIVE BUSINESS UNIT III / **PLAYERS** MULTI

SUNRISE ON A NEW ADVENTURE

Final Fantasy XIV producer and director Naoki Yoshida speaks to Daniella Lucas about what to expect from the upcoming Dawntrail expansion

1

The last ten years of FFXIV have taken the Warriors Of Light on a truly epic journey; players have fought gods, stopped the tide of imperialism, ended a 1,000-year war against dragons, saved a parallel world, and even halted a despair-induced apocalypse. So how on earth can the team behind one of the best MMORPGs ever hope to follow that up?

We recently got the chance to speak with Final Fantasy XIV director and producer Naoki Yoshida (aka Yoshi-P – his in-game username – to fans) to talk about what it takes to make an MMORPG, and the upcoming Dawntrail expansion that will see us setting off on a completely new adventure.

Developing something on such a huge scale is a truly momentous undertaking, so what has Yoshida learned over the last decade of the game? "If I had to give one example to the Naoki Yoshida from 13 years ago, I would have told him that you need to be careful about pacing," he tells us. "When we look at MMO development it differs from a standalone game in that when you're going through the development process for a standalone game, it's just very much a short timed sprint. Whereas if you were to give an analogy for an MMO, it's more that you are participating in a marathon.

"You're in it for the long run and you have to pace yourself appropriately. You need to be able to plan which parts will be going uphill, which parts with work would I be going downhill, what type of weather there would be, and so on. When it comes to MMO development, it's quite important to pace yourself properly and take care in the long run. However, having said that, probably the Naoki from 13 years ago – the only thing he knew is to run forward and to sprint all the way. So even if I gave myself that advice back then, I think I would probably just end up sprinting anyway!"

NEXT CHAPTER

Fortunately he's taking all those lessons with him into the

1 Kozama'uka might be one of FFXIV's most beautiful locations, full of crystalline waters and lush greenery. 2 Given the importance of sharing food in FFXIV's storytelling, will we get to kick back and sip tropical cocktails with Urianger in the full game? 3 You'll be able to customise your Hrothgar to your heart's content.

development of the next expansion. With Endwalker drawing the saga of Hydaelyn and Zodiark to a close, Dawntrail marks a fresh beginning, but that doesn't mean that the themes of the game will be scaled back. It also turns out that we may never have got such a large-scale story arc in the first place. "I think that it would be great if it is the beginning of something big," Yoshida tells us. "I already have ideas potentially for 8.0 and 9.0 in my head, but when it comes to the question of whether this will become a long-spanning story arc, I think that depends on the reaction of the players.

"To give a little bit of context behind this answer – originally when we released A Realm Reborn, I wasn't actually sure if Final Fantasy XIV would be able to develop it into a long-spanning saga," shares Yoshida. "So we went on to create Heavensward, and we were working on things in the background, but it was only when we were in the development of Stormblood that I came to the realisation that we could create this into kind of an epic saga, and we could develop on this idea of the battle between light and darkness and create something really big for the players."

"THE ULTIMATE AIM THAT I HAVE IS JUST TO CREATE SOMETHING THAT EXCITES THE PLAYERS"

Before getting ahead of themselves, it was more a case of building in the right opportunities. "Throughout the development I had put in foreshadowing here and there with the hopes that we would eventually be able to deliver the future for the players," says Yoshida. "But on the development of XIV, it's more a case of we never just completely develop straightforward. We do have elements of ad lib here and there, so sometimes we will switch things around, sometimes we will switch things back. But the ultimate aim that I have is just to create something that excites the

players and eventually something that will be epic for our players."

A lofty aim – and with Dawntrail already showing a ridiculous number of things to look forward to, we're excited for the future. We'll soon be exploring the continent of Tural, full of dense forest, vast mountain ranges, and a surprise cyberpunk city. In addition to the new areas and dungeons, there are two additional Jobs (the dual-blade-wielding Viper and the artist-mage Pictomancer), a higher level cap (it's rising to 100), a new casual type of content called Cosmic Exploration, a very shiny graphical update, and another race to play as.

REALLY FELINE IT

That race isn't entirely new, as male Hrothgar have been in the game for some time now. But just as the last expansion saw the formerly female-only Viera get their bunny-boy counterparts, Dawntrail will see players finally able to live out their strong cat lady dreams by playing as female Hrothgar. Though we nearly didn't get the fearsome, athletic look – at one point in the design process they were cute.

1 Estinien's back, and dripping wet (as he tussles with a monster mid-river, of course).
2 Krile steps up to rock the Pictomancer job in this expansion, continuing the tradition of team members changing their style as the story goes on.

Yoshida explains the design process: "In general we always create an internal competition of sorts for our characters. So basically they will be tasked to pick up ideas of what they feel is representative. What we do is initially just create the lore and we will give that information about the lore to the arts team, but we will not say anything about the appearance. We leave it up to them to come up with designs of what they think would be appealing or what they think would be appropriate. And we did the same thing for Viera (although admittedly for Viera, we already had Fran [from FFXII]), but also we did the same thing as well for male Hrothgar."

The proposed designs featured quite a lot of variation. "If I recall correctly for Hrothgar female, we

Out of this world

What to expect from Cosmic Exploration

Final Fantasy XIV already has plenty of casual content that you can noodle around with and enjoy when you're not in the mood for a fight, such as Gold Saucer and Island Sanctuaries, but Dawntrail will be adding another type of activity in the shape of Cosmic Exploration.

Here's what Yoshida could tell us about it: "I don't really want to give an impression of how the content would be, but in terms of this content it's similar to Ishgardian restoration in the respect that everyone is working towards a target together on the same world. So we will continue updates on Island Sanctuary based on player feedback, but this time the concept is really to play with everyone and to combine efforts with everyone.

"On the other hand, with Ishgardian restoration, it was quite a straight run from start to finish. But this time we will be changing the themes and changing the visuals throughout as the content goes on."

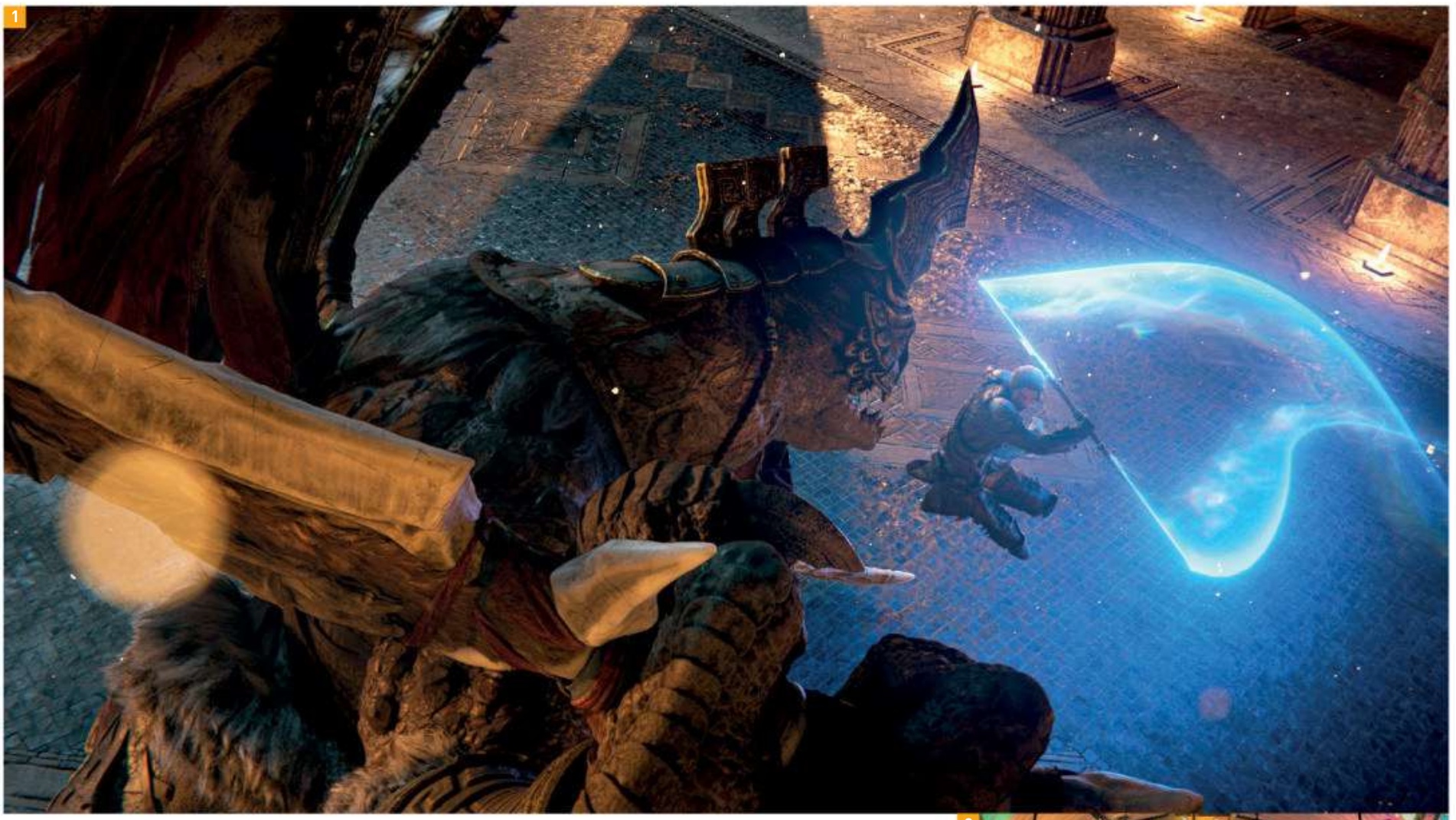
had in general eight types which were proposed and then from those eight types we narrowed it down to three," continues Yoshida. "I was really thinking which one would be good. I picked the final candidates and then from there we went on to work out the fine details. When we were going through that process, I was quite torn when I was thinking about which type to go for. There was one which was a little bit popular internally, which had a smaller type of build. This was more like akin to – I wouldn't say fairy-like – but it was quite cute and it looked quite good. But when I thought about the typical characteristics of a female Hrothgar, I thought there should already be some notion of them being strong and nimble. And so I was torn. But I eventually went for the current version, which you see now, and I chose something which had a more athletic build."

But there is one important question that all players want to know: can they wear more hats? "Regardless of whether it's male or female, we are working on increasing the number of [hat] variations that we have," Yoshida explains. "Ultimately there will be no difference between male and female. Currently there are some types of headgear which they cannot wear, but we will make more variations so that they will be able to wear them."

SUN'S OUT

As well as a new adventure, FFXIV will be getting a fresh look in the form of a graphical update.

"I THOUGHT THERE SHOULD ALREADY BE SOME NOTION OF [THE FEMALE HROTHGAR] BEING STRONG AND NIMBLE."



1 The scions find Tural in political turmoil. The only solution? Going ham with a new twin-bladed weapon, it seems. 2 Nothing creepy about a carousel with nobody on it.

Environments and characters are set to have a serious makeover from Dawntrail's release in summer. Though with the game being so large this won't be an easy undertaking and will have to roll out in several stages. So why do it now?

"One major reason would be that with Endwalker, we were able to bring one big saga to a close. When we went through that process we had players all over the world – they played our game and they were able to see a clean conclusion to a story that had been spanning for such a long time. I think they would be happy to have seen that conclusion, but I think they probably must have also been a bit concerned about what will happen moving forward," Yoshida starts telling us. "When players would see the graphics updates, they would realise that Final Fantasy XIV will still push on and it will still continue driving forward to the future and take on new challenges. And in that regard, I think it would give players a sense of ease so they would not need to worry about that."

But it's not just for long-time players. "For the next reason, when comparisons are drawn with our game compared to new games which are coming out obviously from an official perspective, people would compare the visuals," says Yoshida. While only two new numbered Final Fantasy games have released since, it's been quite a while since the MMORPG first launched. "A Realm Reborn was released ten years ago, and although when they compare it to the latest games which are out or when they think that it's been released ten years ago, that would give them kind of like a kind of a sense of a notion that the quality of the game is low. And they would think of it as an old game," Yoshida continues. "But the important thing with MMOs is that we need to constantly get new players in, otherwise the overall scale of our game would shrink. I also thought the graphics update is really important to get the younger generation into Final Fantasy XIV. So by implementing the graphics updates, we can actually improve the appeal for XIV to those types of players."

"WE NEED TO CONSTANTLY GET NEW PLAYERS IN, OTHERWISE THE OVERALL SCALE OF OUR GAME WOULD SHRINK."

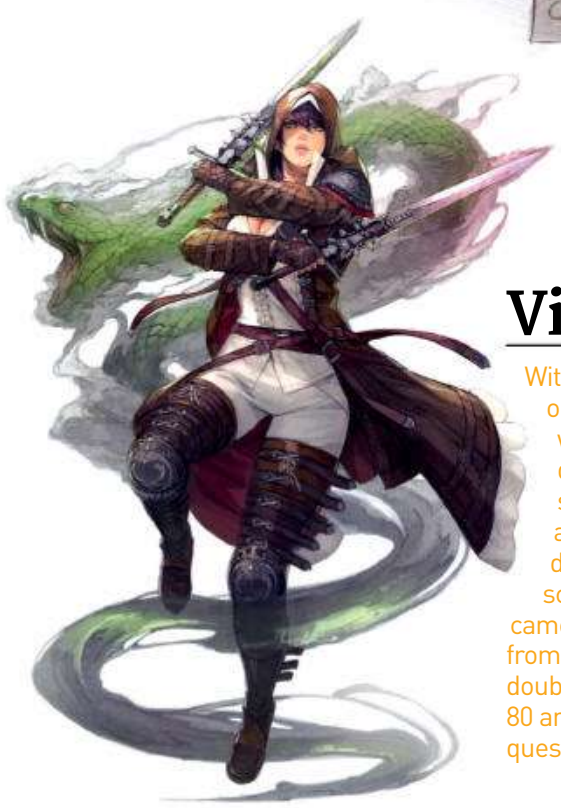
It's not just players who benefit, but the development team as well. "There is a third reason and this is like I wouldn't say so much a problem for our development team, but it's in terms of the mentality

Work it

The two new playable jobs coming to Dawntrail

Pictomancer

This magical damage-dealer uses a giant paintbrush and palette to conjure up spells and minions to attack on their behalf. It's set to be a mix of bigger creations that take time to create, and a handy selection of instant-cast spells. No Bob-Ross-style happy little accidents here, it's all purposeful murder magic – but with pretty colours. This Job is inspired by the artist character Relm from Final Fantasy VI and has rarely been seen in the series until now. It also starts at level 80, but can be unlocked in Gridania.



Viper

With two blades that can be dual-wielded or combined into a single staff-like weapon, Viper is a melee damage-dealing class that focusses on quick strikes. After a lot of player feedback asking for another dual-wielding job that differs from Ninja (though they share scouting gear) this is what the dev team came up with. It reminds us a lot of Zidane from FFIX, who used both daggers and double-ended thief swords. It starts at level 80 and you'll be able to pick up the first quest to unlock it in Ul'Dah.

"NO BOB-ROSS-STYLE HAPPY ACCIDENTS HERE, IT'S ALL PURPOSEFUL MURDER MAGIC."

FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL

that we have in the development team," says Yoshida. "A Realm Reborn was released back in 2013 and when we look at the graphics pipeline, it's now two generations old. The artists who are working on Final Fantasy XIV, I wanted to give them a better environment. By being able to work on more advanced graphics technology, they can advance their career and they can also be able to work with the newer features. So, there's a benefit for both in the sense that players can benefit from better quality and graphics, but our artists and engineers in the team can benefit by using more advanced technology and can advance their careers. From that side of things as well, there's also efficiencies which we will gain by using better graphical technology. Overall, the graphics update is quite a difficult endeavour, but I think it because of those benefits, we really want to give it our best and see it through."

The graphical overhaul joins technical improvements we've been enjoying on PS5 since that version launched in 2021. "We had optimised our graphics pipeline for the PlayStation 5 version, and we also used the benefits of the PlayStation 5 SSD. [The] SSD has a very efficient IO, which is a technical term for inputs and outputs. The reading of the data on the PlayStation 5 is extremely fast, and we will continue to make the best of that moving forward as well as when it comes to the PlayStation 5 version as well," says Yoshida. "We introduced several graphics options which give almost the same playing experience as on PC. Players can

roduced in the last expansion, bunny boy Erenville quickly won the hearts of many – and is now part of the team heading off to Dawntrail's Tural. male Hrothgar are almost here! The team put many different designs to the test before arriving at this strong, athletic one. bernetic concept art seems at odds with the rest of Tural. What could it mean? A new raid, The Arcadion, seems to play into this as well.

3

expect to continue enjoying these kinds of graphic experiences on the PlayStation 5 moving forward."

GEARING UP

It's reassuring that Yoshida is keeping both the future of the game and of his team in mind. Players also play a big part in shaping the future, as Yoshida makes sure he takes their feedback into account. For example, the approach to Relic weapons (one of the most prestigious weapon types you can earn in the game) has changed with every expansion, and is set to change once again in Dawntrail thanks to player feedback.

"Naturally I'm not able to give any concrete information [for Relic weapon quests] because it's still in the planning process," Yoshida tells us. "I do appreciate that some people do say that it's too easy in Endwalker but on the other hand generally players are playing many jobs on a single character. So although the weapon itself is easy to make, they can benefit from being able to enhance several weapons for different jobs on the same character.

"But on the other hand, when we think about players who have been playing for a long time, I think for a lot of them what really sticks in their memory is the original Zodiac weapons and just how difficult it was to like, for example, collect all of the materials and to enhance those weapons. And so when we think about it that way, it's great for the players to be able to kind of reminisce on that kind of aspect. I want to reiterate that I'm not going to make it exactly the same as it was originally, but I do appreciate that it gives a sense of reward to the players, so I would like to keep that in mind. We are currently proceeding with our planning for the new content, but I will also add that we will have various routes in place in terms of the methods to enhance the weapons."

"PLAYERS CAN EXPECT TO CONTINUE ENJOYING THESE KINDS OF GRAPHIC EXPERIENCES ON THE PLAYSTATION 5."

Over ten years since its launch, Final Fantasy XIV is an online game that's not just going strong, but continues to evolve in exciting ways. That's thanks in part to a development team not afraid to embrace change with each expansion, and to try different things, while also taking care to forge ahead in the right ways. The horizon is looking bright indeed for Dawntrail and beyond.

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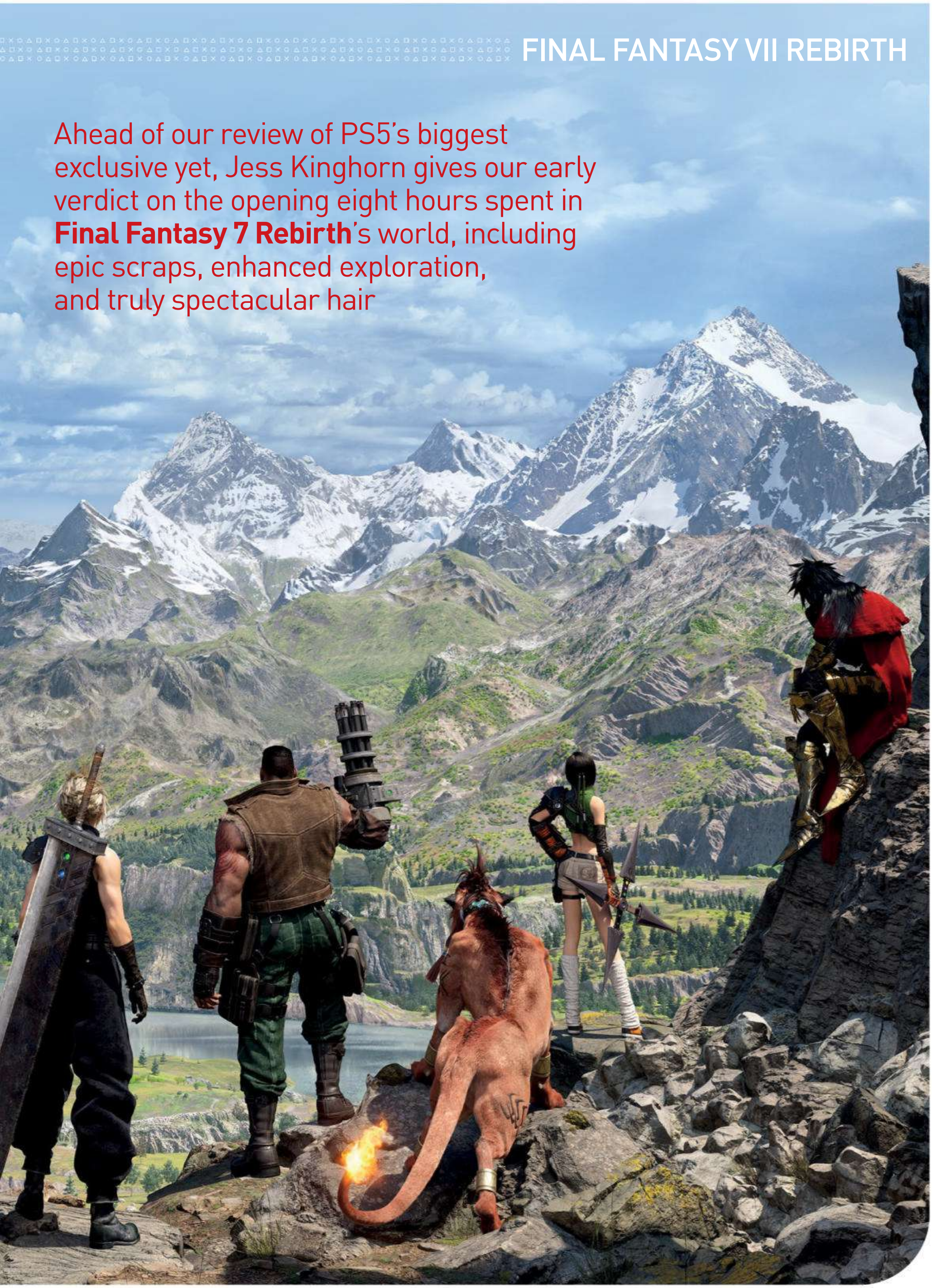
LUCKY NUMBER SEVEN

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 29 FEB **/ PUB** SQUARE ENIX
DEV SQUARE ENIX CREATIVE BUSINESS UNIT I **/ PLAYERS** 1

The gang's all here – and we suspect their story might not go quite the way we've always remembered it.

Ahead of our review of PS5's biggest exclusive yet, Jess Kinghorn gives our early verdict on the opening eight hours spent in **Final Fantasy 7 Rebirth**'s world, including epic scraps, enhanced exploration, and truly spectacular hair



1 Be sure to keep working on your folios whenever you're in town to access flashy teamup attacks like Aerith and Cloud's Firework Blade. 2 Disappearing after the Nibelheim incident, Sephiroth haunts the party. Aerith explains he's not "alive, so much as 'around.'" 3 Choose your words wisely to strengthen your bonds with your party... their fate could rest in your hands.

With everything that's just happened (see 'Remake recap,' opposite), gun-arm-slinging environmental activist Barret asks an obvious question: what's the story with Sephiroth? Holed up somewhere within the citadel walls of Kalm, the gang settle in for Cloud's answer, with childhood friend Tifa paying particularly close attention. The blonde sourpuss' recasting of the Nibelheim incident takes the form of a playable flashback and, as a not-exactly-faithful retelling, it's a fitting opening for the next stretch in this Unknown Journey.

Cloud claims to have been about 16 when he first met Sephiroth, working alongside him as a SOLDIER – a member of the elite private military arm of the Shinra Electric Power Company, sent to settle a situation in Nibelheim. Commentary from our present-day party accompanies our flashback tour of Cloud's hometown. Tifa asks, "Huh? You went to my place?" and we can choose either to turn back from the Lockhart residence or to press on by answering 'Yes.' As we begin snooping in earnest, Tifa's followup questions become increasingly irate: "You went into my room?" flows into "You went through my stuff!?" Ultimately, we think better of continuing to pry, and Cloud says he was just joking. Quite rightly, both Tifa and Aerith say they don't think it's very funny, and we feel incredibly guilty.

"IN BETWEEN ITS LIGHTER MOMENTS THIS PLAYABLE FLASHBACK IS SHOT THROUGH WITH A COMPELLING SENSE OF UNEASE."

Speaking of sticking our nose in where we ought not to, Cloud later leads the charge in clearing the way up Mount Nibel. Basic Buster Sword attacks are hammered out with ◎, rapid taps making for rapid strikes, while a lull before tapping ◎ cuts through monsters with a sweeping strike. It's snappier and slicker than ever, though we're still struggling with how to get a leg up against airborne enemies. In the mean time, you can loiter till they come to you by pressing △ and switching into Cloud's parrying Punisher mode stance, though lobbing a spell will also bring winged fiends right back down to Gaia.

Cloud's still restless. He throws himself into another series of reps right in the middle of the mountain path, and there's a playful little rumble from the DualSense with every squat. So far, so gorgeously reimagined, and not without its sense of humour. But in between these lighter moments this playable flashback is shot through with a compelling sense of unease. Many long-time fans will know what's coming, but those not already well-versed won't be able to ignore Tifa's scepticism as Cloud recounts

his version of events. It's a tension Rebirth builds on, and just one of many ways it'll keep you guessing.

RELATIONSHIP DRAMA

Back in the present, the spectre of Sephiroth whispers doubt in Cloud's ear, challenging his sense of reality. As a result, he argues with Tifa. Nestled in bed later that evening, Tifa just can't shake it off. In one of several scenes that expands upon the friendship between two of Final Fantasy VII's iconic heroines, she

Wait, Zack never chatted to Marlene before, right? How else will Rebirth rewrite the story?

The Remake recap

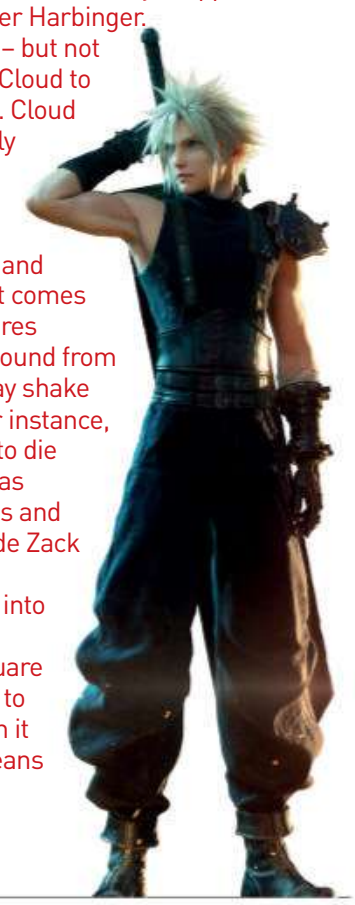
Rebirth is only the middle chapter in what will eventually be a three-game series – but what led us to this point?

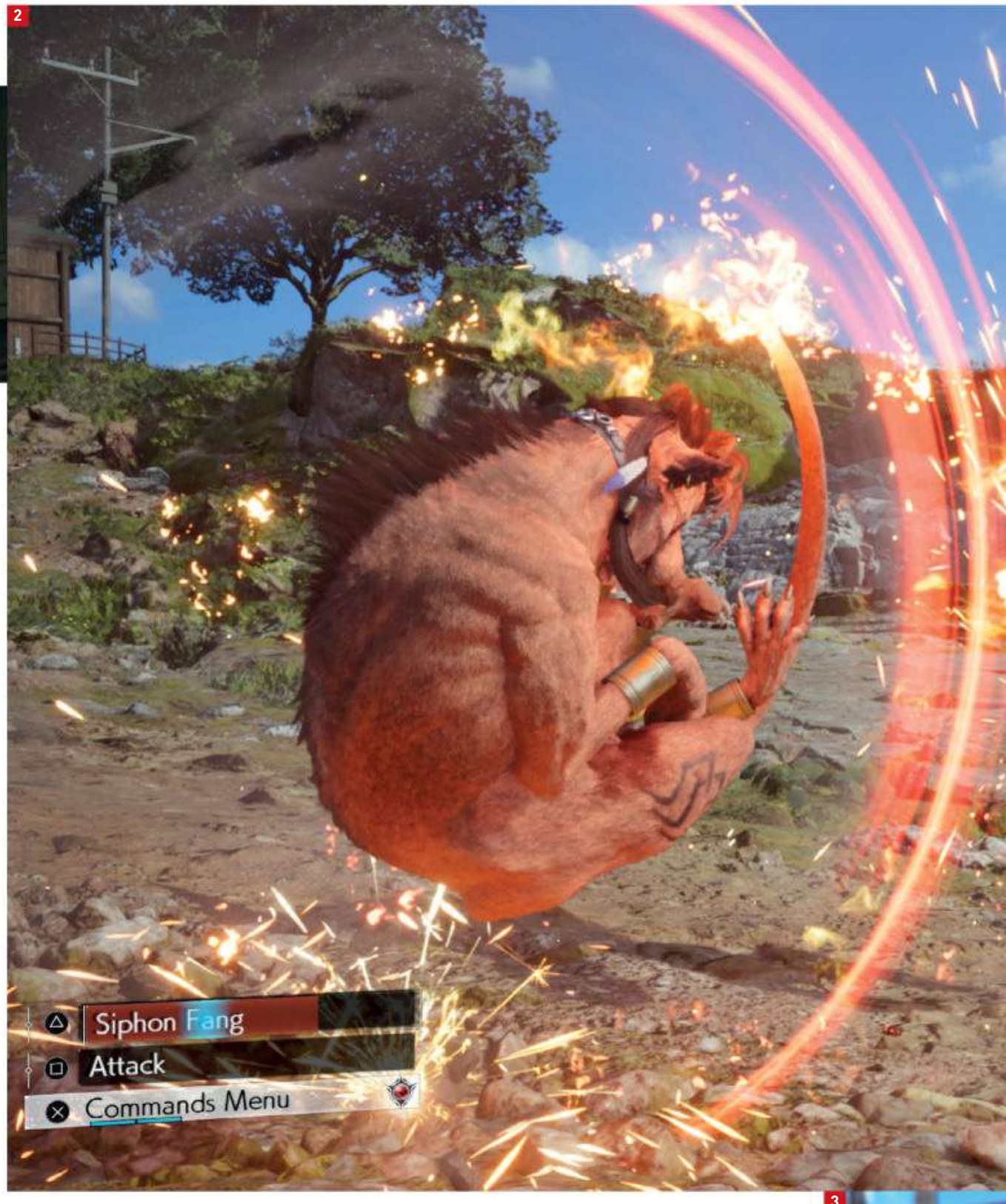
2020's Final Fantasy VII Remake was an adaptation of only part of the original 1997 RPG's first disc, and also introduced fresh elements like meddling spectres known as Whispers. Remake opens with eco-terrorist group Avalanche blowing up a Mako reactor. Belonging to the Shinra Electric Power Company, the reactor siphons the planet's literal life force, slowly killing it in the name of cheap power and record profits.

Along with other members of Avalanche, spiky-haired protagonist Cloud weathers the retaliatory destruction of his home by Shinra, though there's little time to grieve as new recruit and enigmatic flower girl Aerith is abducted by Shinra amid the chaos. As Avalanche members attempt to spring their friend from this trap, the situation becomes increasingly complicated when previously MIA legend Sephiroth kills the president of Shinra. The villain also attempts to kill the Avalanche cell's leader, Barret, but the Whispers intervene to ensure that fate sticks to its destined course.

The party escapes Shinra's forces, only to be cornered by Sephiroth's (and destiny's) apparent gatekeeper, the Whisper Harbinger. The squad defeat both – but not before Sephiroth asks Cloud to join him in defying fate. Cloud refuses and temporarily banishes the silver-haired spectre.

The Whispers are now out of the picture, and all bets are off for what comes next. Rebirth still features familiar beats but, unbound from fate, key plot points may shake out *very* differently. For instance, characters once fated to die long before now, such as Avalanche recruit Biggs and Cloud's former comrade Zack Fair, are still alive and kicking. As we venture into the next stretch of this Unknown Journey, Square Enix looks determined to keep us guessing when it comes to what that means for *other* characters marked for death...





1 You can go to town on the piano in Tifa's room – though you don't have to be any good. Your party will praise the simplest of keysmashes. 2 Ferocious furball Red XIII joins your party as a fully playable character. He fights by Cloud's side as thanks for freeing him from Hojo's lab in Remake. 3 If you missed the pointy edges of Cloud and company's original look, fret not – their throwback 'fits are repped in tower defence minigame Fort Condor. 4 Folios can be updated in town and function much like an especially well-presented skill tree, unlocking fresh synergy moves for your party.

» confides in Aerith. Witnessing Tifa and Aerith's budding friendship throughout Remake was a joy for me, and here they back each other up in more ways than ever before.

On the subject of building bonds, we venture out into the city of Kalm. The rest of the party headed out early to explore, and we find Tifa standing beside a bizarrely nostalgia-evoking decommissioned tank. Still a little unsure after last night, she asks Cloud if it reminds him of anything. We can be straight up and say it looks like the water tank in Nibelheim, but saying it looks like 'the place I made that promise to you' is what finally cuts through last night's tension. Cloud's actions and the strength of his bonds with his party members can alter certain story events, so check on your bonds frequently with L1.

"BUILD UP ENOUGH SYNERGY IN COMBAT AND TWO OF YOUR PARTY MEMBERS CAN PULL OFF A FLASHY TEAMUP ATTACK."

Relationship mechanics are all the rage, and this is a worthwhile evolution of the hidden 'date' system found in the original 1997 game. It's faithful to the same essential idea, offering more opportunities to spend time with already beloved characters, while working in concert with more multidimensional character writing and fantastic English-language voice performances to give this cast just a smidge more depth. Considering we may have to face up to some difficult goodbyes throughout Rebirth, it serves to emphasise just what we stand to lose.

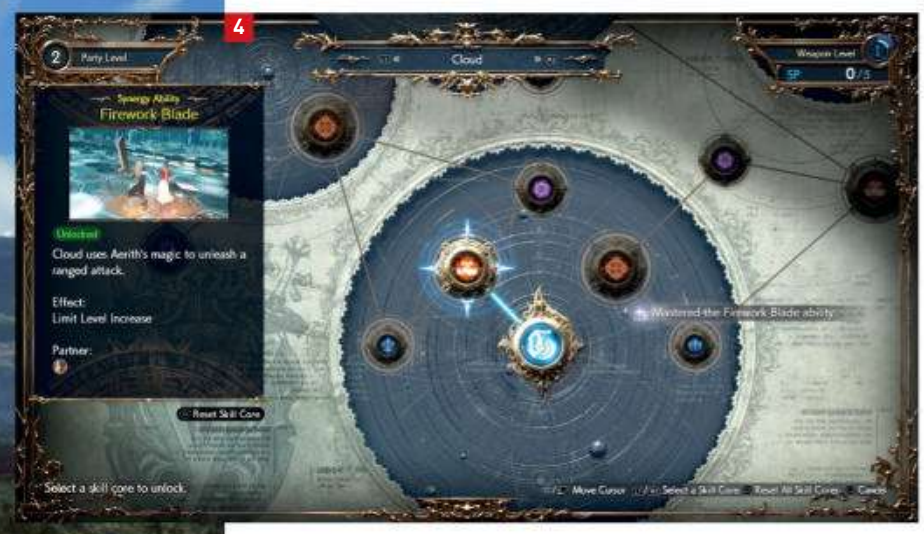
At Maghnata Books, Aerith offers a similar dialogue choice by asking if we'd like to climb the clock tower with her. Saying yes grants our bond a positive, smiley-faced bump.

As we explore Kalm while Aerith grabs tickets for the clock tower, snatches of NPC conversation bring the town to life; some pose for group photos, one young man hopes his beloved will meet him at the agreed-upon place, and murmurs at the bottom of the clock tower allude to the observation balcony being a favoured spot for love confessions. But after racing Aerith to the top, no such outpouring is forthcoming. Instead she fights her bestie's corner. "So, did something happen between you and Tifa…?" she asks Cloud, adding, "Don't look so shocked. We are roommates, you know." Truly, a line that will unleash about a million more fanfics.

Though she's not done there, delivering the finishing blow: "I would've given anything to have a friend when I was growing up – don't take her for granted!" And that's hardly the only way Aerith can back up her besties in Rebirth.

KALM BEFORE A STORM

As Shinra's forces shatter Kalm's tranquility, there's no choice but to cut and run. Escaping into the wide-open space surrounding the walled city, we can finally appreciate



the expanded scope of combat as we're surrounded by friend and foe alike. You take to the field with three active party members you can control directly, while everyone else forms a supportive AI-controlled back stop, hurling bullets and projectiles from a distance.

Folios, which we could tinker with at Maghnata Books, expand your party's capabilities. Similar to other mainline entries' sphere grids or licence boards, these skill trees offer unlockable abilities that can better encourage synergy between your comrades. To briefly recap, you build up synergy by expending ATB gauge charges on solo abilities, and with enough synergy, two of your party members can pull off a teamup attack. It's a satisfying bassline for combat, as you're always working towards an even bigger finish.

For instance, points in the right place allow Tifa to jump off Cloud's sword for Leaping Strikes – but let's focus on the true dream team, Aerith and Tifa. Divine Punishment is a flashy teamup attack that sees Aerith cast a magical dome that Tifa can then propel herself around to deal damage over a wide area. But folios don't solely offer glitzy finishes; alternatively you can spend the 5 SP on the much more practical Bodyguard ability, seeing a 'partner' defend Aerith as she moves about the field – don't worry, I'm already writing *that* fanfic.

As Aerith steps out into the first of a few massively expanded, open field areas, she says, "And there it was! The first step on our new journey. You coming?" Wherever this unknown journey leads her, we'll be right by her side until the end – whatever form that takes.

Rebirth's take on the classic journey to the Forgotten Capital is full of life. Whatever form the final destination takes, it's bound to be monumentally memorable. ■

SPIN CITY

We look at the times **Final Fantasy**'s developers have expanded on its worlds rather than entirely stick to the anthology format – with mixed success

Square Enix's premier RPG series is known for its rich worlds, so it's no surprise that during its 35-year history the devs have often expanded on them beyond the main numbered titles.

Whether that's via remakes with a twist like FFVII Rebirth (p54), or the constantly growing Final Fantasy theme park that is FFXIV (p42), there's always an extra adventure to be found. We've gathered together all of the series spinoffs to show just how much bigger Final Fantasy really is, and explore the different approaches to building out those worlds.

Jack's quest isn't just set in the first game's world, it involves fighting through areas pulled from the rest of the games too.

WE'RE HERE TO KILL CHAOS

Stranger Of Paradise added a dark, alternate story to the original Final Fantasy

Format PS5, PS4 **Released** 2022 **Expanded** Final Fantasy

We'd seen previous remasters of the original Final Fantasy game improve upon its pixel art and soundtrack, but Stranger Of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin is a different beast entirely. Instead of being a remake with fancy graphics, or even a slight twist on the story á la FFVII Rebirth, it's a full-blown reimagining and expansion of where the series all began – with Ninja Gaiden-like action combat thanks to developer Team Ninja.

Following a very angry, Chaos-obsessed man called Jack and his friends Ash and Jed, Stranger tells the story of the amnesiac trio and their fight to save the world from Chaos. Of course things aren't that straightforward and they end up having effectively to ask themselves, 'Are we the baddies?' It turns out the only way to kill Chaos is to become Chaos and set the stage for four Warriors Of Light to eventually kill *you*. And so the stage for the first-ever Final Fantasy is set.

Square Enix has said that Stranger Of Paradise sets up an alternate storyline rather than being the true original, so maybe one day we'll get a FFI remake with a twist, similar to how FFVII Rebirth is to FFVII.

FOUR POINT FIVE'S A CROWD

Final Fantasy IV: The After Years had a pseudo sequel added to its rerelease

Format PSP **Released** 2008 **Expanded** Final Fantasy IV

Set 17 years after the events of FFIV, The After Years was an episodic mobile game that eventually got the treatment it deserved when it was ported to PSP. It came as part of a huge FFIV bundle called 'The Complete Collection' which also included an extra Interlude chapter that linked the two games together. We finally got to see what happened to the world after the events of IV and play as the son that resulted from Cecil and Rosa's relationship.

Unfortunately for the heroes of the first game, the second moon appears once more to see the world destroyed and they're left with no choice but to stop it, and to confront their pasts in the process. The original episodic structure makes for a great character study as each party member receives more individual focus, and really helps you appreciate the first game even more.

THE BIRTH OF AN ICON

Kingdom Hearts showed Sephiroth how to rock his one wing

Format PS2 **Released** 2002 **Expanded** Final Fantasy series (but mostly VII)

When the Kingdom Hearts series first started it pulled in Final Fantasy characters as well as Mickey and co. The Heartless had destroyed various FF worlds as well as Disney ones, meaning you'd find Wakka at the starting beach and Squall brooding while also recommending a teamup with Donald and Goofy. You could even find Cloud fighting in Hercules' coliseum.

The Final Fantasy connections may have been dropped from KHIII, but the series has had a surprisingly lasting impact on one character in particular: Sephiroth. The silver-haired king of conditioner owes his iconic 'one black wing' look to this spinoff that sees you adventuring alongside Disney Princesses. He may have sprouted multiple wings as part of his God form in the original FFVII, but the dark feathers and human body look that we love him for didn't become a thing for him until the first Kingdom Hearts in 2002. Thanks Mickey!

Spinning up

The offshoots growing series of their own

Final Fantasy Tactics

A tactical RPG spinoff series that started on PS1 with a setting so good that Square Enix ended up using it in the main series, in Final Fantasy XII. It's quite rightly still praised as one of the best Final Fantasy games of all time.

Final Fantasy Dissidia

With all the Final Fantasy games having such great characters, it was only a matter of time before a crossover fighting game would begin a brawling series of its own. Unfortunately it's never quite broken into the fighting game scene fully.

Chocobo Mystery Dungeon

Our favourite yellow-feathered Final Fantasy mascots got their own series, starting in 1997, that saw you battle your way through procedurally generated dungeons. The series also branched again into a few karting games. Vroom vroom or kweh kweh?

"OUR FAVOURITE YELLOW-FEATHERED FINAL FANTASY MASCOTS GOT THEIR OWN SERIES IN 1997."

SEVENTH HEAVEN

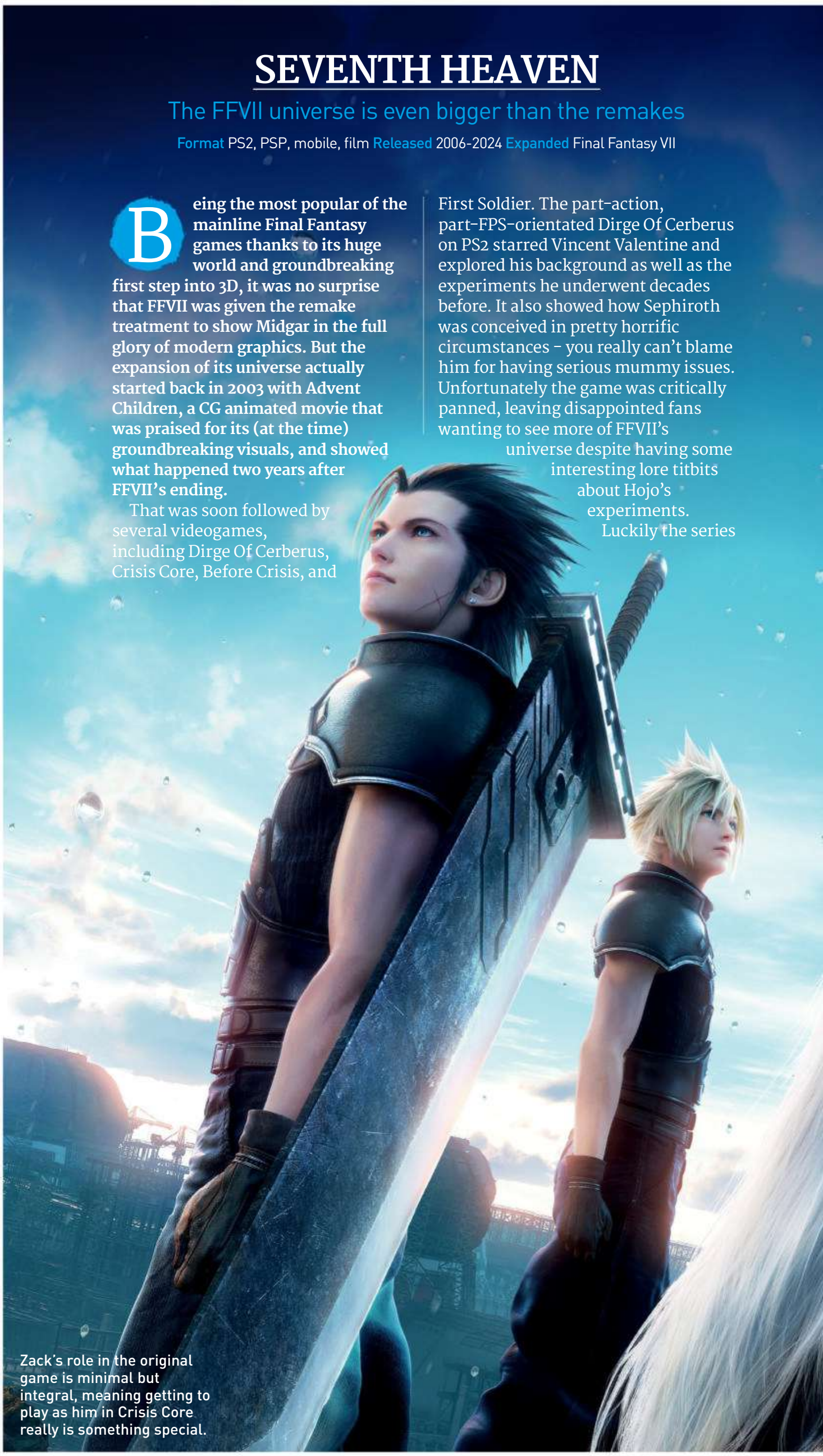
The FFVII universe is even bigger than the remakes

Format PS2, PSP, mobile, film Released 2006-2024 Expanded Final Fantasy VII

Being the most popular of the mainline Final Fantasy games thanks to its huge world and groundbreaking first step into 3D, it was no surprise that FFVII was given the remake treatment to show Midgar in the full glory of modern graphics. But the expansion of its universe actually started back in 2003 with Advent Children, a CG animated movie that was praised for its (at the time) groundbreaking visuals, and showed what happened two years after FFVII's ending.

That was soon followed by several videogames, including Dirge Of Cerberus, Crisis Core, Before Crisis, and First Soldier. The part-action, part-FPS-orientated Dirge Of Cerberus on PS2 starred Vincent Valentine and explored his background as well as the experiments he underwent decades before. It also showed how Sephiroth was conceived in pretty horrific circumstances – you really can't blame him for having serious mummy issues. Unfortunately the game was critically panned, leaving disappointed fans wanting to see more of FFVII's universe despite having some interesting lore titbits about Hojo's experiments.

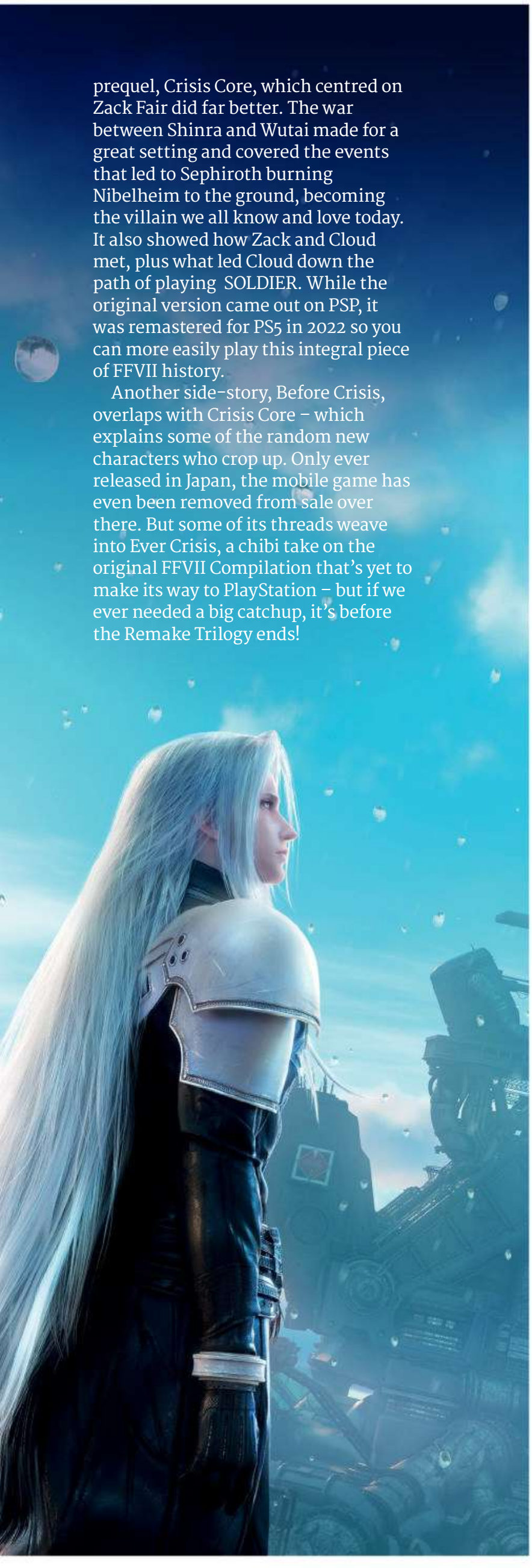
Luckily the series



Zack's role in the original game is minimal but integral, meaning getting to play as him in Crisis Core really is something special.

prequel, Crisis Core, which centred on Zack Fair did far better. The war between Shinra and Wutai made for a great setting and covered the events that led to Sephiroth burning Nibelheim to the ground, becoming the villain we all know and love today. It also showed how Zack and Cloud met, plus what led Cloud down the path of playing SOLDIER. While the original version came out on PSP, it was remastered for PS5 in 2022 so you can more easily play this integral piece of FFVII history.

Another side-story, Before Crisis, overlaps with Crisis Core – which explains some of the random new characters who crop up. Only ever released in Japan, the mobile game has even been removed from sale over there. But some of its threads weave into Ever Crisis, a chibi take on the original FFVII Compilation that's yet to make its way to PlayStation – but if we ever needed a big catchup, it's before the Remake Trilogy ends!



IN-SPIRA-ATIONAL

Defeating Sin wasn't the end for Final Fantasy X

Format PS2, audio, book **Released** 2003 **Expanded** Final Fantasy X

While Yuna may have brought about Spira's Eternal Calm in 2001, that was far from the end of her journey. The developers made a short film showing Yuna living her life on Besaid two years later, and it showed how the world of Spira was being rebuilt. However, people had different ideas on how to do that, giving rise to various factions such as New Yevon and the Youth League. Eventually Rikku shows up with a sphere that shows someone who looks a lot like Tidus, and presents Yuna with an opportunity to go on her own adventure, setting up the series' first direct sequel, FFX-2.

Unlike the original X, X-2 used a dress sphere system that allowed Rikku, Yuna, and new friend Paine to switch outfits *and* classes (such as Thief and White Mage). The game had a lighter tone and felt like an alternate universe take on Charlie's Angels with the girls going on missions all over Spira to see what had become of the world, and how some were finally embracing Machina. Of course, a world-ending threat has to pop up along the way, requiring Yuna to masquerade as the dead lover of the ghost of a man that looks like Tidus but isn't Tidus. Don't worry, we were as confused as you were while playing. Her reward for all that hard work? Actually getting the real Tidus back. Finally, a happy ending! Or was it?!

TIME AND TIDUS

Turns out the developers still couldn't leave Yuna and co alone, writing a novella about the Zanarkand war that never made it out of Japan, and creating a game set six months after X-2. Last Mission sees the girls get back together to explore a dungeon, but they all argue and reflect on how they've changed and drifted apart. Finally an audio drama was produced, set another six months later, in which we discover Sin has been reactivated and there is no Eternal Calm after all, so Yuna has to set off on her pilgrimage once more. Oof, what a downer!

FABULA-OUS PLANS

Final Fantasy XIII was set to have the biggest universe of them all

Format PS3 **Released** 2011 **Expanded** Final Fantasy XIII

Take a deep breath now, this one's complicated. Square Enix intended Final Fantasy XIII to be on a scale unlike anything it had made before. Instead of expanding upon earlier games, XIII was conceived as a sprawling universe from the get-go – not only with sequels and side-projects, but also an overarching mythos beyond it called Fabula Nova Crystallis.

Let's start with the sequels. XIII saw Lightning and a band of found friends branded by gods to end the world – instead they saved it as two of them turned into crystal to prevent the world of Cocoon from crashing into Gran Pulse, the world below. XIII-2 starts three years later on Gran Pulse and follows Lightning's sister Serah. A young man called Noel is sent from the future to Serah as Lightning has been whisked away to Valhalla to prevent the world succumbing to Chaos. The two journey through time to prevent paradoxes from making Cocoon fall once more. While they manage to do this, the shock from the change to the timeline kills Serah and Chaos is ultimately unleashed to eventually destroy the timeline anyway. Lightning goes into crystal stasis until she's needed again.

Lightning Returns, the third game in the series, takes place 500 years later. In it, Lightning's revived for the last 13 days before the world ends, and sent on a mission to save the souls of

"SQUARE ENIX INTENDED FINAL FANTASY XIII TO BE ON A SCALE UNLIKE ANYTHING IT HAD MADE BEFORE."

Final Fantasy XIII was intended to be a franchise of its own from the off, meaning the trilogy feels like a more cohesive work than other spin-offs.

humanity so they can go to a new world. After fixing a spot of godly betrayal she succeeds and everyone gets to have a fresh beginning.

While that was the end of Lightning's story (though a fair few Japanese novellas expanded the lore between games), there was originally going to be a further expanded universe to go with it. Fabula Nova Crystallis was meant to link several games, including Final Fantasy XV, together in a connected universe but that never transpired.

FFXV started development as Versus XIII and was meant to be a dark part of the same universe, but ultimately was distanced from the project. It did retain some of Fabula Nova Crystallis' DNA though, specifically in the game's theming with Noctis being burdened with a task to complete by the gods, and crystals being a source of magical power and divinity.

Type-0 was also intended to be part of the mythos too as it was developed as Agito XIII (flip the page!). Ultimately the Nova Crystallis universe didn't pan out as hoped, but remains integral to Lightning's journey.

Lost to time

Not every spinoff has survived on Playstation

Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings

FFXII did get a sequel – one that played like a Tactics game, appropriately enough – but unfortunately never made it to Playstation. Vaan and Penelo got to go on a new adventure, but what we really want is more Balthier!

Final Fantasy: Legend Of The Crystals

Final Fantasy V didn't get a traditional series expansion, instead receiving a four-episode anime adventure set 200 years later with a completely new story, portraying the original heroes as figures of legend.

Final Fantasy XI

Okay, so technically you can still play Final Fantasy XI, but not on PS2 any more as the console servers were shuttered – a tragedy as the MMORPG is still going strong even though it's been over 20 years since it launched.

Stuck in limbo

How Type-0 both is and isn't part of an extended universe

Final Fantasy Type-0
Format PS4, PSP **Released** 2011
Expanded Final Fantasy XIII

This action game involves schoolkids fighting in wars and is a bit of a special case when it comes to expanding Final Fantasy universes. You play as the students in Class Zero, who have been granted power by their nation's crystal to fight on the front lines against the forces of the other crystals and their respective countries. It originally started development as Agito XIII so shares the mythos of the Fabula Nova Crystallis universe; however it was distanced from the other linked game late in development and technically became its own thing as Type-0. But by the time it was split off, a lot of Nova Crystallis' themes and gods had been placed within it – people being branded as l'cie like in FFXIII, and trying to rally against gods using their souls for their own ends.

So now it sits in a strange kind of limbo between being a part of a greater power and having its own destiny as a separate entity. Hmm, that sounds an awful lot like the fate of every entry in the Fabula Nova family...

"SITS IN A STRANGE KIND OF LIMBO BETWEEN BEING PART OF A GREATER POWER AND HAVING ITS OWN DESTINY."

FFXV's world was thoroughly explored across DLC and extended media, but it made the core game feel a bit diluted as a result.

THE BOYS ARE BACK IN TOWN

How Final Fantasy XV went big with its world

Format PS4, mobile, film **Released** 2016 **Expanded** Final Fantasy

After the whole Fabula Nova thing didn't quite pan out and Versus-XIII became FFXV, Square Enix decided to take a slightly different approach to the whole giant expanding universe thing by going on a huge multimedia blowout instead. There were games, novellas, movies, and anime – a truly huge undertaking to cover all angles in an attempt to bolster the series and FFXV itself. It cost an absolute fortune, and ultimately wavered at the end as it was all just too much.

Things started well with a prologue demo that let you play as Noctis and served as a taste of the main game. Then came Kingsglaive – a CG movie that covered the events that led to Noctis' adventure and attracted acting talent like Sean Bean, Lena Headey, and Aaron Paul to voice characters. Sadly the movie didn't land as well as expected and is probably where the cracks in the whole expanded universe idea really started to show.

GO FISH

A short anime showed the adventure of the main cast of Final Fantasy XV and how they all became friends, and there was even a VR fishing game. No genre was out of bounds, it seemed!

To follow all that, Square Enix had also planned for DLC to expand on events and characters within the main game, such as Episode Ignis and Prompto. Each piece of media and DLC provided context for the main game, but that made it feel fractured as a result. For example, if you hadn't watched Kingsglaive you would have missed vital information for the start of the journey, and the character DLC covered parts of the game where individual party members left to do things important to the plot before returning to the group – parts that felt out of place at first as the context wasn't originally there.

Unfortunately this new direction didn't quite work out. Final Fantasy XV didn't sell as well as Square Enix had hoped (even though it did really well), and with all that extra media costing so much to produce, eventually the project was wound down with a large amount of DLC cancelled alongside it so the universe was never quite finished. Things were somewhat wrapped up in a book that covered the events of episode Ardyn and beyond that created a different, happier ending for Noctis and Eos. It's a shame we never got to finish and play *that* version of the game.

"EACH PIECE OF MEDIA AND DLC PROVIDED CONTEXT FOR THE MAIN GAME, BUT THAT MADE IT FEEL FRACTURED AS A RESULT."

The future

Looking into our Mothercrystal ball

While some of the big projects didn't quite pan out, we can nonetheless expect more from the ever-expanding universe of Final Fantasy. FFXIV is still constantly growing with the new Dawntrail expansion set to release later this year (p42), and we'll soon have the next chapter of the FFVII remake in our hands (p54). FFXVI is also growing with new DLC on the way to expand its world even further.

Finally, and most excitingly, strong rumours are pointing to Final Fantasy IX being the next game to get the remake treatment, hopefully in a similar fashion to FFVII. There's a huge amount of Final Fantasy to look forward to in our futures.

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Reviews

"IT'S NOT A HISTORICAL CURIO."

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A metroidvania that'll grow on you

HIGHLIGHTS

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Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League

You wouldn't get it

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £69.99
ETA Out now
PUB Warner Bros
DEV Rocksteady
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 13-15 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable subtitles; remappable controls; swap sticks; aim assist; changes taps to single-press; disable graphic neck bomb effects; auto-run; aiming toggle; text-to-speech; colourblind modes

Harley Quinn, clowned queen of crime, might want to bonk us on the head with her epic-tier mallet for making comparisons to the Arkham series. But like Batman on the case, it's impossible not to see the connections. We're sure the great detective would agree that this pivot from top-tier solo action to live service multiplayer is quite the curious case indeed.

Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League isn't only from Arkham developer Rocksteady, it's a bona fide sequel. An early moment that sees the titular squad, officially known as Task Force X, exploring Metropolis' 'Batman Experience' drives this home, as they poke around a museum mocked up to take you through the Arkham series' story. Then the lights go out. And Batman begins picking you off one by one. And this time, he's looking to kill.

This four-strong supervillain team, forced to work for the government lest their brains explode, have been outvillained, you see. Brainiac's skull ship looms over the city, and his purple powers have brainwashed most of the Justice League, including the now Dark-purple Knight. Playing in co-op, you stumble through the dark trying to locate exits until only one of you is left, all alone with Batman in the shadows. It's just a shame that this single short sequence within the first hour is about as memorable as any mission is going to get, the game devolving into a tired live service grind.

BOMB BUDDIES

It's tragic, too, as there's a dynamism to the opening hours. It's an invasion-in-progress, meaning you catch the tail end of the [blorp!] hitting the fan at speed force velocity. Painfully under-briefed by their scheming handler, Amanda Waller, the squad are ping-ponged between League members as they struggle simply to stay alive,

We love the look of the four Squad members, at least. Their game, not so much.

Then the lights go out. And Batman begins picking you off one by one. And this time, he's looking to kill.

Getting around this open world Metropolis is a breeze – every character in the Squad can run up walls and cross distances with just a couple of button presses.

1

2

3

4

1 These are possibly some of the best character models we've ever seen, and their emotive faces are put to work. 2 Countershoot the flashing enemies to open them up for a stun, but avoid getting sniped or you'll be shocked, and unable to use traversal powers for a while. 3 King Shark is well-spoken and kind, but just doesn't understand humans. 4 Loot basics are very similar to many, many other games.

being barely saved by The Flash before he too is turned by the mind-altering alien invader.

The characters are instantly easy to love thanks to a combination of witty writing, excellent performances, and best-in-class character models. Not quite fully realistic, there's tremendous detail to everyone's faces that means plenty of expressive emoting, which is frequently used as the squad shoot each other looks when things go awry.

While they're definitely not good people, each of the four antiheroes is nonetheless endearing, and far from two-dimensional. Harley's a ruthless goofball with an unquenchable thirst for Wonder Woman, but determined to do right by her friends; Deadshot's an exhausted pro who wants to build a better life for his daughter; King Shark craves violence and lacks an understanding of humanity (yes, it's the Drax thing), but is also surprisingly level-headed and honourable; and then loud-mouthed Aussie Captain Boomerang is... well, he's just a bit of an arsehole (and more power to him).

Similarly, the 'Justice League' are just as much a joy. Far from being mindless zombies, their brainwashing has brought out the dark side of their personalities. Heroes turning evil is a common touchstone for comic readers, but it still feels fresh here. The Flash is still a quipper, but becomes much more sinister when he's able to tear you limb from limb in an instant, while intergalactic policeman Green Lantern takes on a sneering edge when presented with Task Force X's convicts.

The late Kevin Conroy's final performance as Batman is a real highlight as well. Becoming Brainiac's strategist for the invasion, he's on comms constantly throughout the main story, evaluating your threat level and taunting the squad. You can tell this is a studio which still carries a torch for the dark knight.

INJUSTICE LEAGUE

Unfortunately if Suicide Squad had its own C-list supervillain name it'd be Wheel Spinner, because that's what the plot spends most of its time doing, barrelling towards the finish line in an ungracious and rushed manner without offering a satisfying conclusion. Instead, you can only stop the invasion if you keep coming back for more repetitive missions in the future – this is live service through and through. This isn't a game you can play just for the story while ignoring the online stuff if you're looking to reach a fulfilling ending.

This poor pacing bleeds through to affect the strong character writing we were just praising. The Suicide Squad's support cast are, aside from Amanda Waller (a dazzling performance from Debra Wilson, of Forspoken and Star Wars Jedi fame), paper-thin. The first half of the game mostly revolves around meeting and recruiting these allies, who exist to introduce you to the core mission types and sell you loot and upgrades for a swathe of multi-coloured currencies at the Hall Of Justice hub. The Penguin can craft guns for you. Poison Ivy (now a child á la Groot) can give your grenades and melee weapons elemental properties. Toyman can adjust your augments. And so on. Even the core squad are unevenly served by the story. Of the four Justice League boss fights, only The Flash and Green Lantern get time to breathe, providing room for Captain Boomerang and Deadshot respectively to have a bit of an arc. To call the final two rushed would be an understatement, offering very little to Harley and even less to King Shark.

If Suicide Squad had its own C-list supervillain name it'd be Wheel Spinner.

Amanda Waller is an indomitable force, but also represents the callous cruelty of black ops operations.

You're not only fighting alien mutants in your effort to defeat Brainiac and save the city, but corrupted helicopters and tanks too. A *lot* of helicopters.

It all feels like a rushed sprint to establish mission objectives that can be endlessly replayable, and an endgame that's much the same.

INFINITE CRISIS

Just because something can be endlessly replayed doesn't mean you would want to. Metropolis is gorgeous, perhaps the best open world Rocksteady has crafted to date. But there's very little reason to explore it – it's just a place in which multiple combat arenas can exist, offering one of only so many samey objectives.

Playing through the story is a barrage of escort missions, tower defence, point banking, and destroying turret batteries. Even the boss fights, against foes like The Flash, feel anticlimactic, which you'll eventually realise is so that their mechanics can later be reused. The Flash fight forms the backbone of the first of 13 promised endgame-level fights (of course, much slower there and with multiple extra goons); while an early alien cannon boss becomes a repeatable endgame challenge to earn your Promethium, which you need to enter and challenge the highest level of endgame content.

In some ways it's a smart use of resources to make sure that barely any main story mission has unique mechanics – after all, if the focus is on repeatedly grinding the same missions, why bother to hide it? But it also ensures that playing through the narrative remains as dull as continuing to play after. Every mission type is something you've seen before, with barely any explanation to why they're so thinly gamified into rounds.

Side-missions are the same, with the same objectives, and no real narrative of their own other than the fact you're unlocking more upgrades from the quest-giver (Ivy, for instance, will give you more types of elemental damage to mix and match in combat). Here they further decrease the variety in what you can do by also restricting your actions. Rick Flag, for instance, wants you to press ◎ to use grenades. Okay.

OK, BOOMER

In action, Suicide Squad simply serves up wave after wave of enemies, with only slightly differently dressed-up objectives. So that combat had better be good, right? While it doesn't hold a candle to Arkham's brawling, (which is some of the best in the biz), combat here is quite pointedly not trying to do the same thing at all.

Melee exists, but it's not at the forefront. This is a fast-paced third-person shooter with superpowers. Close-quarters is mostly used to open enemies up to damage by destroying their shields, or to take advantage of a stunned enemy if you blast 'em in the legs, harvesting their shields for yourself in the process. Melee even has a cooldown to keep you from using it too much, which is fine as outside of those core use cases the damage they deal is decidedly limited.

Keep dishing out justice to these mutated former Metropolitans and you'll be able to use your traversal attack to do

1 Forcing you to stay on the move, combat is quick and messy in a way that feels fresh, until the game spreads it way too thin. **2** Squint through the barrage of tips in this very endgame content and you'll spot Aussie supervillain Captain Boomerang pulling off his Suicide Strike ultimate attack. **3** Sunny Metropolis' layered design is incredible. It's just a shame there's little reason to explore the city.

a big area-of-effect attack, as well as a single-target strike which, given the often huge number of foes, can be a bit pointless.

A dodge is clunkily tied to L3, but for the most part you'll be trying to out-damage the legions of foes as you chug more and more of the blue shield juice from them. Spot an enemy with sparks flying out of them and you can countershoot to stun them before following up with explosive damage.

Staying on the move is key, especially as the endgame throws a lot of snipers and leaping, muscular enemies at you. This is where each hero feels more unique to control, essentially having their own spin on vertical movement on L1 and horizontal on R1. There's some finesse, such as the way Harley's grapple swings from her drone or Deadshot halts in mid-air to aim with his jetpack as the fuel depletes. But when aiming down sights, most heroes feel the same as one another.

With a chaotic UI and constant movement across these large scale scuffles, it can be hard to keep tabs on what's going on, making co-op in particular feel a bit disconnected as your allies bleed into the background. The result is combat that feels quite messy. There's a fun loop here that occasionally delivers moments of genuine excitement, but with so much going on it's a loop that, like the rest of the game, goes around and around without much in the way of a clear end. A lot of stuff just kind of happens at you, then ungraciously ends once you've shuffled the last citizen onto the escape bus, ended up collecting enough points without noticing, Ivy's plant manages to grow, or the like. While Arkham's fights were shifting, rhythmic puzzles to solve, this is more like jamming jigsaw pieces together until you see something approximating a cool picture. And, like The Elongated Man, it's stretched thin over sparse variation.

More content (Joker!) is on its way, but the endgame as it stands is creatively bereft.

KNIGHT FALL

Your combat experience can be tweaked with loot and talents, but you can also get away with ignoring a lot of this. It's hard not to glaze over it all as everything is overexplained, and harder still to get excited by constant incremental decisions.

Things don't get deeper until the endgame. On the one hand it gets even more granular, with over-level points earned when your squaddie surpasses max level 30 spent on the likes of "+0.5% shotgun damage"; on the other it shakes things up in bigger ways with villain perks, for example splitting the chance of certain melee damage giving you grenade ammo or dropping one to explode there and then. Unusually for a loot-shooter, gear is mostly flat, without weapon levels, split only between rarities. You'll have some Legendary gear to play with by the campaign's end but won't get much in the way of Notorious or Infamy gear until late in. That, based on specific supervillains, is a bit more interesting (the grenade power is, naturally, Two-Face's).

Being able to respec gear at your base, if you have the resources, is a friendly approach. But it contributes to a flattened

4 Enemies feeling blue? Melee to harvest those shields! 5 How you'll feel by the end. 6 Gizmo will sometimes give you timed vehicles – a welcome but rare bit of variety, but ultimately not much more interesting than it looks.

endgame that, at launch, doesn't have much variety or give you many tools to keep up with escalating difficulties. And so the endgame features the spongiest healthbars you've ever seen as you spend most of your time replaying three missions as you earn more difficulties to play, which earns you higher-tier Infamy gear. Characters are essentially all nudged to one of a handful of damage dealing meta-builds – the best revolving around throwing grenades near infinitely. These endgame missions are, shocker, repeats of objectives you've already done just somewhat bigger.

Spending Promethium for the privilege of deploying into these missions means two to three plays of other infinitely spawning activities drawn from the familiar objective pool beforehand. The harder Flash-like boss fight requires three times the P-points, and can take about half an hour of unloading sniper rifle clips into to complete for barebones reward. More content is on the way (Joker comes in March), but the endgame as it stands is creatively bereft. Don't get your hopes too high.

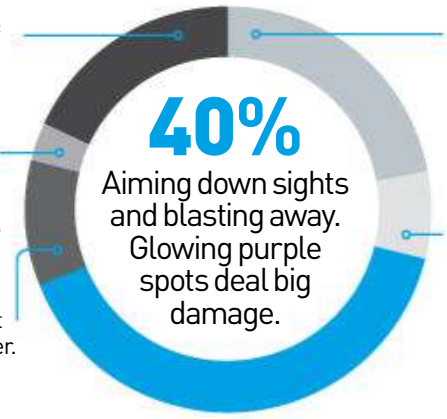
There is a part midway through, when Green Lantern is downed, when we thought this might be going somewhere. We were wrong. This is a fairly fun third-person shooter that struggles to give you much reason to keep blasting through its campaign, let alone the hours it intends you to spend with the endgame. Like Task Force X we're bamboozled, in over our heads, and want a way out – this isn't what we signed up for.

Fairly fun writing and shooting let down by almost everything else. This is merely a live service treadmill looking for a reason to exist that doesn't yet satisfy. Oscar Taylor-Kent

5 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: SS:KTJL



18% Letting go of L2 to tap R2 to whack goons for sweet shield.

3% Completing exciting 'contract' challenges like press dodge three times in a row.

10% Chuckling at some of the banter. Oh, Captain Boomerang, sir.

22% Using the shoulder buttons to try to deftly move around. Sometimes succeeding!

7% Trying to get your head around Infamy Sets, The Nexus, Raising Hell tiers, and more endgame guff.

HOW TO... DEAL WITH INFUSED ENEMIES

Some enemies are infused with the Justice League's powers. Flash enemies need to be countered before they're vulnerable; Batman ones are near-invisible. While Green Lantern foes aren't 'infused', their glowing shields can be blasted away once you earn special ammo.

STATPACK

13
True final bosses, all of whom must be beaten to end the invasion, and only one of whom is available at launch. Get grinding, squad.

04
Squad members... at launch. More will be added each season, with Joker first. (Deathstroke, Victoria Fries, and more are rumoured.)

21
Pieces of kit in Bane's Infamy gear set, the true endgame. Grind through escalating levels of difficulty to get the chance to nab 'em.

MULTIPLAYER

Squadding up with a pal is quick and easy, and supports character duplicates, though with no level boosting and some progression bugs, things can get out of sync at times and combat can be chaotic. Matchmaking features, but there's no matchmaking for specific missions.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

Lego DC Super Villains has simpler visuals, but is a better co-op game that's oodles of fun to muck around in.

Gotham Knights' barer-bones combat doesn't get in the way of a rollicking co-op campaign.

Well-considered mission design and snappier combat make every Batman: Arkham title superior.

Bosses are lovingly designed but they aren't too taxing too defeat.

Ultros

A metroidvania that's a lily bit different

So you didn't have 'pruning the wayward garden of an alien tomb on the edge of black hole, while a sleeping universe-eating god may or may not wake up' on your bucket list? Well, you're doing it anyway.

The first time you run through The Sarcophagus' overgrown corridors it plays like any other metroidvania: you explore, upgrade tools, plant things, open new areas, and keep heading deeper, further into the day-glo Moebius-meets-The Grateful-Dead alien world. But just when you think you understand Ultros, it relaunches and becomes a new kind of game.

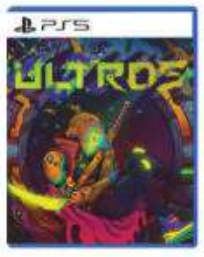
Not only does Ultros include a roguelike reboot mechanic that resets your character's upgrades, weapons, and tools, it manages to make this part of a wider, often meditative, challenge. While your character sleeps the world grows; what you planted and where you planted it changes how you can explore the world on your next run. Plant a solid, vertically growing tree and later you can climb it to reach new areas. Another type of plant, meanwhile, eats through mechanical walls. Feed the ground with compost and future sleeps reveal larger trees and plants.

IT'S A GROWER

In The Sarcophagus, there are creatures and mechanical serfs that love to sting and stab. While combat is good, and there's an effective juggle setup that enables you to fling enemies around the screen, as well as a system that rewards creative, varied attacks with better-quality loot, overall combat rarely challenges and lacks the depth and experimentation of the recent Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown. After a couple of loops you will have locked in most skills (find hidden 'brains' to stop 'forgetting' upgrades); the world becomes less of a threat and the alien feel that makes Ultros tick wanes with it.

Yet combat isn't really core to Ultros. This is a game of many layers that demands you dig deep to reveal its roots. This is a metroidvania built around exploration, growth sims, and skill management. The core challenge of finding and destroying seven sleeping guardians to wake a god is enjoyable and makes the game feels like no other metroidvania. And then just as you think you've got a handle on that, it all changes, again.

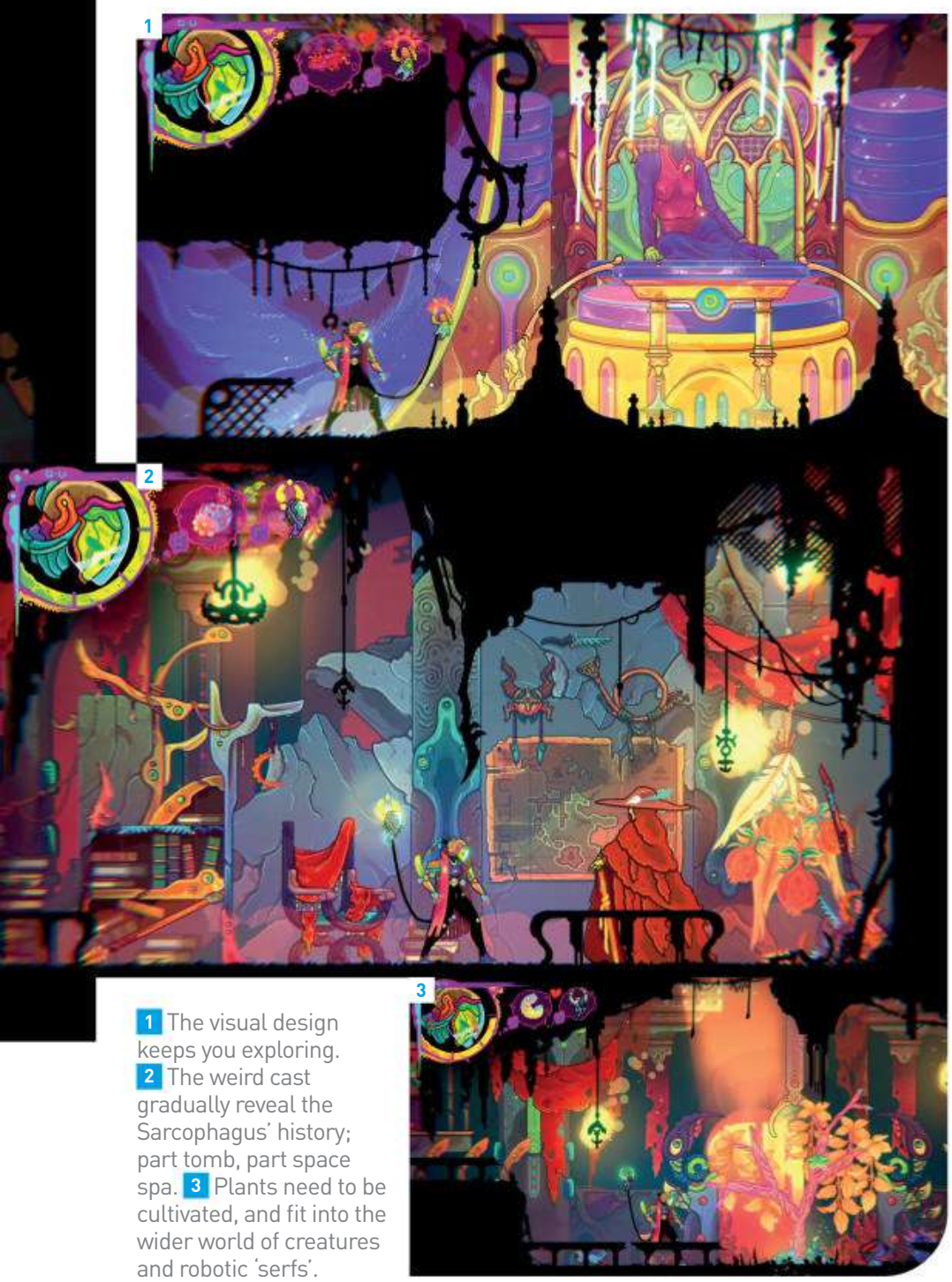
You need to save those mysterious guardians, not kill them – and you need to connect them to each other. In fact, you need to connect the whole Sarcophagus by growing and linking its flora, maybe to keep the god at bay, maybe not. Just when you think you *know* Ultros it shifts the ground beneath you, again, and you'll love it even more. This later game design is less combat-intense and instead Ultros becomes a huge puzzle –



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £29.99
ETA Out now
PUB Kepler Interactive
DEV Hadoque
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10-15 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable background blur, desaturation, and halo VFX; togglable simple fonts, vibration, and screen shake

Later in the game the Sarcophagus' labyrinth is a giant circuit board that needs fixing.



1 The visual design keeps you exploring. 2 The weird cast gradually reveal the Sarcophagus' history; part tomb, part space spa. 3 Plants need to be cultivated, and fit into the wider world of creatures and robotic 'serfs'.

the Sarcophagus' labyrinth is now a giant circuit board that needs fixing.

AND A SHOWER?

This constant rug-pulling demands patience, as just when you think you understand the game you need to recalibrate and it can feel jarring. Adding to the sense of alienation is a lack of explanation; the basic seed and growth loop, what you should be doing, how the world fits together… it can all feel ephemeral and just out of reach, as you fathom it all out for yourself. Alien relics and a cast of oddball characters reveal glimpses of a purpose and mixed histories, but if you're not open to the game's abstract, psychedelic approach you may find yourself bewildered and lost, which you'll find either brilliant or utterly frustrating.

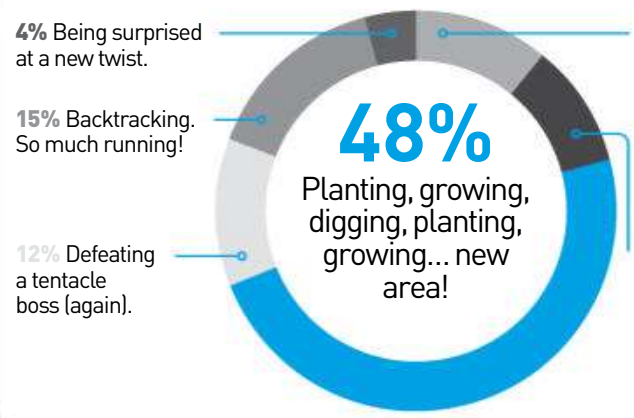
The nature of Ultros means you will always feel a little lost and fumble for solutions to reach new areas, which can lead to a *lot* of backtracking. But it's rare to play a metroidvania so rooted in its premise of growing plants to progress, and of *otherness*. There's enough creativity and ingenuity here to keep you exploring and experimenting, and any time you feel the game becoming plodding and familiar you discover a new room and *that* art direction lights up the screen – you see a neon stained-glass alien icon, a vine-wrapped carcass or even a massive, physical game of Tetris. We can't all be perfect, but Ultros so very nearly is.

Not your usual metroidvania. Ultros' blend of simulation, exploration and psychedelia is only marginally let down by simplistic combat and its own alienation. **Ian Dean**

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

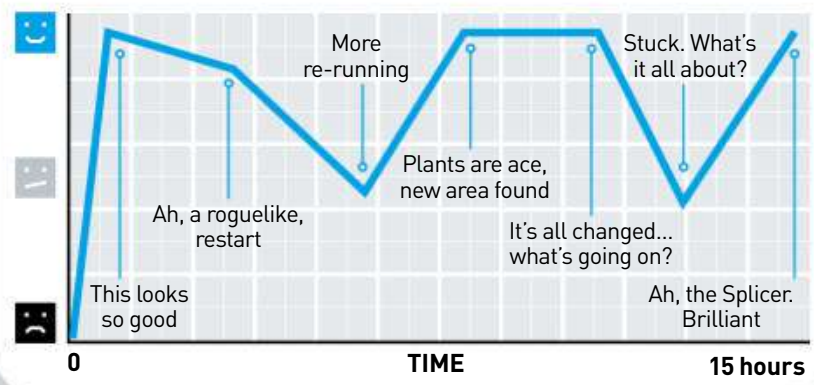
WHAT YOU DO IN: ULTROS


4% Being surprised at a new twist.
15% Backtracking. So much running!
12% Defeating a tentacle boss (again).
11% Studying the map figure out a missing link.
48%
Planting, growing, digging, planting, growing… new area!
10% Drooling over the art. It's so good.

HOW TO… GROW TO EXPLORE

There is a variety of seeds to find in the game, each growing a new plant and capable of affecting the world in different ways. You also unlock a tool to splice plants together, creating helpful hybrids to aid exploration. Try experimenting to see what you can create.

COMPEL-O-GRAPH



LOVING/HATING

SPACED OUT
Ultros looks *so good*. Artist El Huervo (Hotline Miami) draws inspiration from Hayao Miyazaki, Per Åhlin, and a little Moebius.

SPACE BALLS
The combat isn't bad but it could be so much better, and bosses require very little tactical thought to overcome.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

Both Ultros and Blasphemous 2 have fantastic art direction, but Ultros is just more weird.

Ubisoft's latest metroidvania, POP: The Lost Crown, set a new gold standard for the genre.

Oh dear, even an anthropomorphised big-handed bunny couldn't save FIST, we're afraid.

Persona 3 Reload

Pulling the trigger, but just off target

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £59.99
ETA Out now
PUB Sega
DEV Atlus
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 80 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; easy and peaceful (impossible to die) modes; adjustable camera speed

What's the purpose of a remake? That's a question with a hundred answers. But with Persona 3 Reload, a full overhaul of the PS2 RPG, Atlus' intention seems clear: to make it appear as close to Persona 5 as possible, ensuring that the fifth game's megahit status buoys this comparative cult classic. The result is lavish, faithful, and at times also something of a missed opportunity.

The visual overhaul is significant, but this is still a game in which you plough through over 260 floors of one procedurally generated mega-dungeon. The core script, while tweaked (yes, the transphobic beach encounter has been replaced, now involving a conspiracy theorist instead), is often exactly the same. Very little new flesh has been grafted onto the old bones.

COFFIN UP

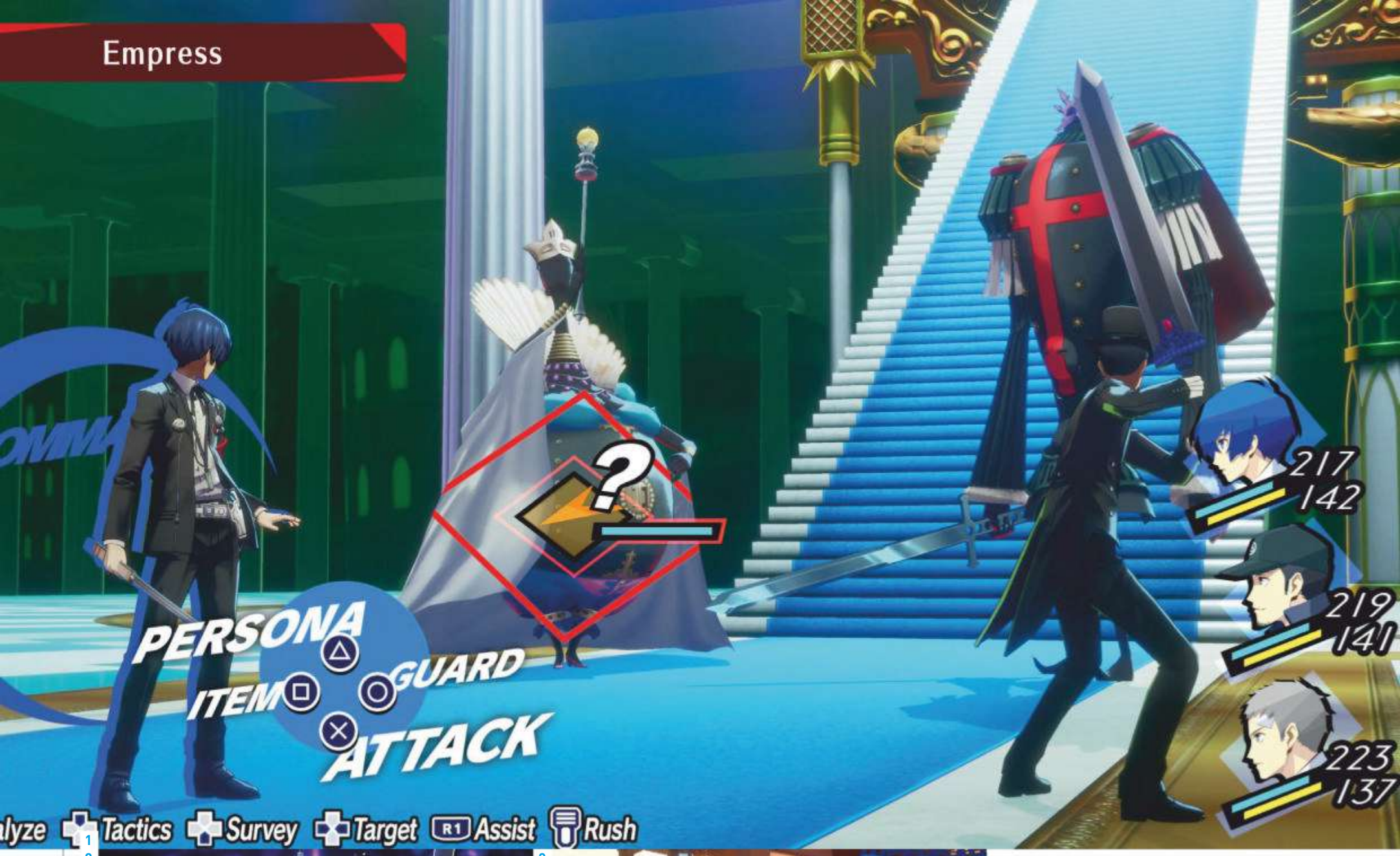
Summoning Persona 3 back to this world is at least worth the chalk for the sigil. It's an important game, both for the series and RPGs overall, to the point where you can almost forgive people for forgetting the first couple of Persona games exist. It was in Persona 3 on PS2 that dungeon delving was first paired with boosting your power by establishing 'social links', all while you struggle to fit everything in as the days tick down – something that's since become a series hallmark.

But it's not a historical curio. Persona 3 remains a vibe, and P3 Reload is not on the list of remakes and remasters that end up losing the visual identity of the original. It's set on the bustling, man-made Tatsumi Port Island, which is plagued by Shadows that hide not merely in darkness but in time: the Dark Hour, occurring after midnight, can only be experienced by a chosen few. Those who cannot are temporarily transmogrified into black, upright coffins; the city is bathed in a stark green light as the moon becomes a sickly yellow orb; water turns red, turning puddles on the street into blood splatter; and the school in the island's centre twists into a tower, Tartarus, that reaches skyward.

As the population's slowly being turned into husks as the Shadows feed, it's up to the

The effects of the Dark Hour benefit greatly from P3R's visual upgrade.

The Dark Hour, occurring after midnight, can only be experienced by a chosen few.



1 Expect battles aplenty. Identify weak points, score critical hits, and deal massive damage, all while avoiding having your own weak spots exploited. 2 Cut-ins are frequent, making battles feel dynamic even though they're strictly turn-based otherwise. 3 Exchange student and fashionista Bebe has a tough run of it in his everyday life, as do all your potential friends. With only so much time, who will you grow closer to?

Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad (SEES) to enter Tartarus and use their demonic Persona, summoned by placing a gun-like Evoker to their head and pulling the trigger, to put a stop to it.

FULL DIARY

It's easy to see why P3 has the reputation of being 'the edgy one', and P3 Reload owns that with its visual direction. As time passes the Midnight Hour's effects are tangible: apocalyptic graffiti accumulates; groups suffering from 'Apathy Syndrome' gather; and trash piles up. The extra level of detail the team can pull off compared to P5 really benefits the presentation here. However, dig deeper during your time as a transfer student protagonist and you'll find that, like Tartarus piercing the veil, P3 is ultimately about finding hope in a bleak world – more about life than death.

As the school year winds on, you've a limited number of days to make the most of things. Brief periods after school and in the evening can be spent how you please. Will you work part-time to earn the cash to buy discount medicine or honest-to-god swords from a back room at the police station? Play arcade games to boost your charm and other social stats? Or hang out with pals, inevitably helping them out with a deep personal trauma in order to forge contracts with stronger demons?

Adjustments have been made to make the whole experience easier to get to grips with.

Mechanical tweaks aside, the biggest letdown is how committed Atlus is to sticking to adapting P3's first release, eschewing additional content from P3 FES and P3 Portable. That means no 40-hour epilogue story, no female main character option and no inclusion of her unique social links.

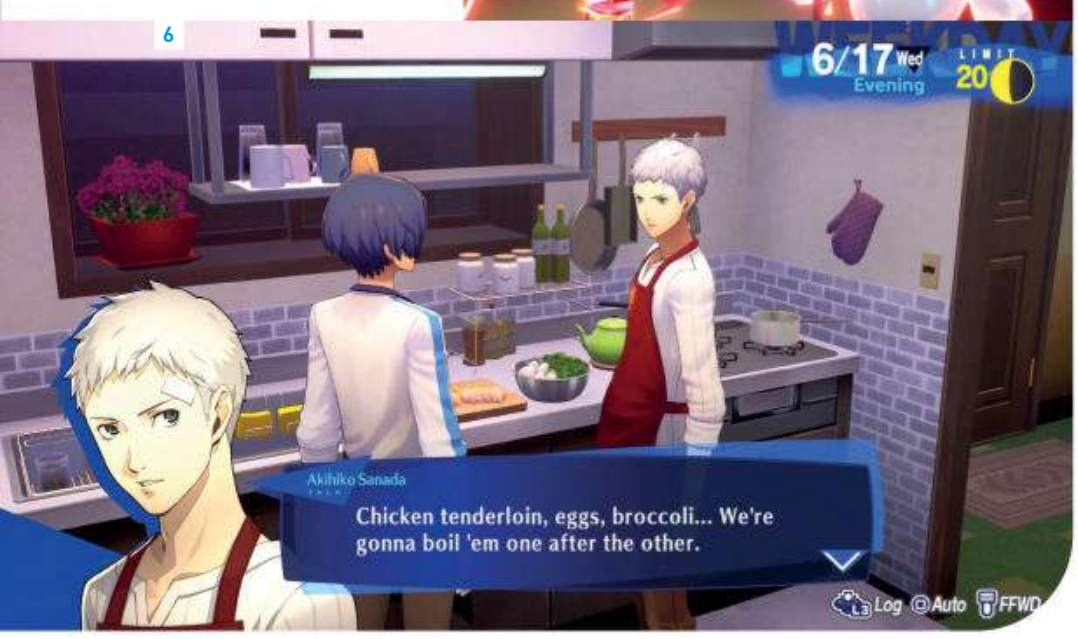
The original's focus on heterosexual romance for female social links means you do feel the difference in how they're treated here (even though you can now choose *not* to date them) compared to your male pals, especially when it comes to party members. New 'Link Episodes' try to bridge the gap, but feel less substantial than the full social links, as do party-wide hangout options like cooking back at the dorm. These new scenes are fun, but it's irksome that it doesn't feel complete given that P3P's social links are some of the series' best.

TILTED TOWERS

Exploring Tartarus can still feel repetitive, but there's a kind of joy to be found in zoning out and smashing through battles as you climb, with many floors being bite-size. Split into six blocks, each now feels more distinct both visually and spatially thanks to new tilesets. Yabbashah's lab-like space, for instance, now sports tighter hallways and walkways, while the palatial Tziah features grander, wider halls, elegant waterfalls, and spinning pillars.

Combat basics are in line with later releases in the series. Centred on downing enemies either by targeting their elemental weaknesses or pulling off critical hits in order to score extra turns, it feels about as dynamic as turn-based combat can get without reactive inputs. While each party member uses

4 Theurgies are spectacular ultimate attacks. 5 New to P3R: multiple personas can team up for ultimates of their own. 6 Cook with your friends to gain abilities and meals, though gym bro Akihiko's menu needs work.



their unique Persona to dish out magic attacks, your main character can collect and summon multiple new ones, so essentially your skillset is constantly growing and evolving. Fusing these demons can create different ones, and this fusion mechanic is much simpler than in Persona 5 or Soul Hackers 2.

Adjustments have been made to make the whole experience easier to get to grips with, though that smoothing can make it a little slippier: removing the fatigue system makes marathoning Tartarus more optimal, and party members' ultimate attacks as well as their 'characteristic' boosts can be a little overpowered. Clearer notifications (like in-game phone texts for events) are appreciated, though they flatten things like Elizabeth's Requests to the point where they feel more like fetch quests than ever.

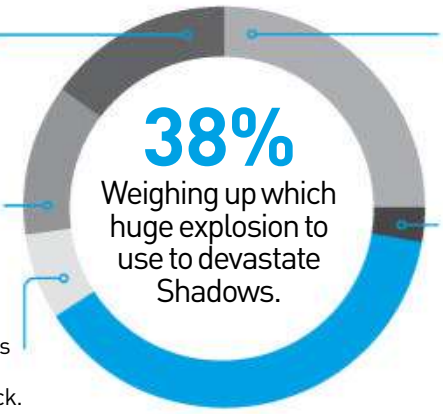
Persona 5 is lauded for its slick style, but it feels as though P3R has lost something in trying to emulate that. No fancy menu transition here looks as good as in P5, nor can Tartarus hold a candle to that blockbuster RPG's deftly designed dungeons. P3R is so caught up in imitating P5 that aside from its luxurious visuals it doesn't feel like it's properly taken the opportunity to expand on the original vision upon modern hardware. Boss fights at full moon are as cursory as ever, and despite some minor extra content, rival Persona group Strega still feels underdeveloped. Compared to the additions in prior versions, P3R is relatively cautious – a disappointing result for a series that's previously taken ambitious swings.

Torn between multiple Personas, this is a great remake that should entice newcomers, while a missed opportunity to expand on the occult classic. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: PERSONA 3 RELOAD



15% Smashing demons together to create bigger allies, including Satan!

12% Ambushing Shadows with ease thanks to P3R's new skills.

7% Popping moves to the reworked hip-hop soundtrack.

25% Weighing up whether to go for ramen with Kenji or bookshopping with Chihiro.

3% Being impressed by hard lad Shinjiro's pro-chef skills. Dreamboat.

HOW TO... EXPLORE MONAD

P3's basement is now chopped up all over the tower. Doors leading to strong enemies and big rewards can spawn at random, while multi-boss Monad Passages are fixed challenges that allow you to enhance all of Tartarus' rewards as you explore. Be ready for a tough fight.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

ISAKO TORIUMI
Homeroom teacher, gamer, and still one chat log away from severe cancellation.

CHIDORI YOSHINO
A mysterious white goth with a dab hand for sketching; can she possibly open up?

RYOJI MOCHIZUKI
Fellow transfer student and musical whizz who utterly rocks scarves.

LOVING/HATING

CHOW DOWN
Animation flourishes bring characters to life. Even something as simple as Yukari chomping through Pocky is charming.

STRAIGHT SHOOTER
Fewer chances to get closer to your male pals is a downer. The extra scenes are nice, but feel like a bandage solution.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES

Sister series Soul Hackers 2 has some highs, but you can feel it's a lower-budget outing than P3R.

NO

Persona 5 Royal's update added some of the game's best moments. P3R is a more basic update.

YES

While special for many, Persona 4 Golden hasn't aged as well mechanically or narratively.

Special attacks, such as a chainsaw throw and a spinning shield, are worth tracking down.

Touhou Luna Nights

Time for an old-school Japanese maid metroidvania

As metroidvania games become more intricate, there's something refreshing about going back to basics. And Touhou Luna Nights – a spinoff from long-running cult series Touhou Project – certainly strips the genre down to its fundamentals. Compact and breezy, your journey here progresses without the burden of excess baggage. Just don't let that lack of frills fool you into thinking it's going to be an easy ride.

If you're not familiar with the many Touhou Project games (there are 19 mainline ones, plus spinoffs), don't worry – Luna Nights is self-sufficient. Sure, the characters here are series regulars, but it barely matters who they are and the plot is no less back-to-basics than the rest of the game. To summarise, protagonist Sakuya, a human maid who works in a demon mansion, is placed inside a kind of simulated world by her mistress Remilia in between mopping floors and making cups of tea. She now has to escape this game within a game world, and other characters cameo as bosses along the way.

In true metroidvania style, Remilia disables Sakuya's powers, which involve freezing time, at the start of the adventure. But naturally you'll reclaim them as you go, along with other skills, opening up more of the map for exploration with each. You probably know the routine: a running slide lets you pass through low gaps, a double jump sees you scale fresh heights, and so on. The main areas are all linked, but for the most part you'll clear them one at a time, beating a boss at the end of each and unlocking a power that grants access to the next. Later in the game you can warp back to the opening areas to breach the handful of rooms that were initially off limits.

INFO

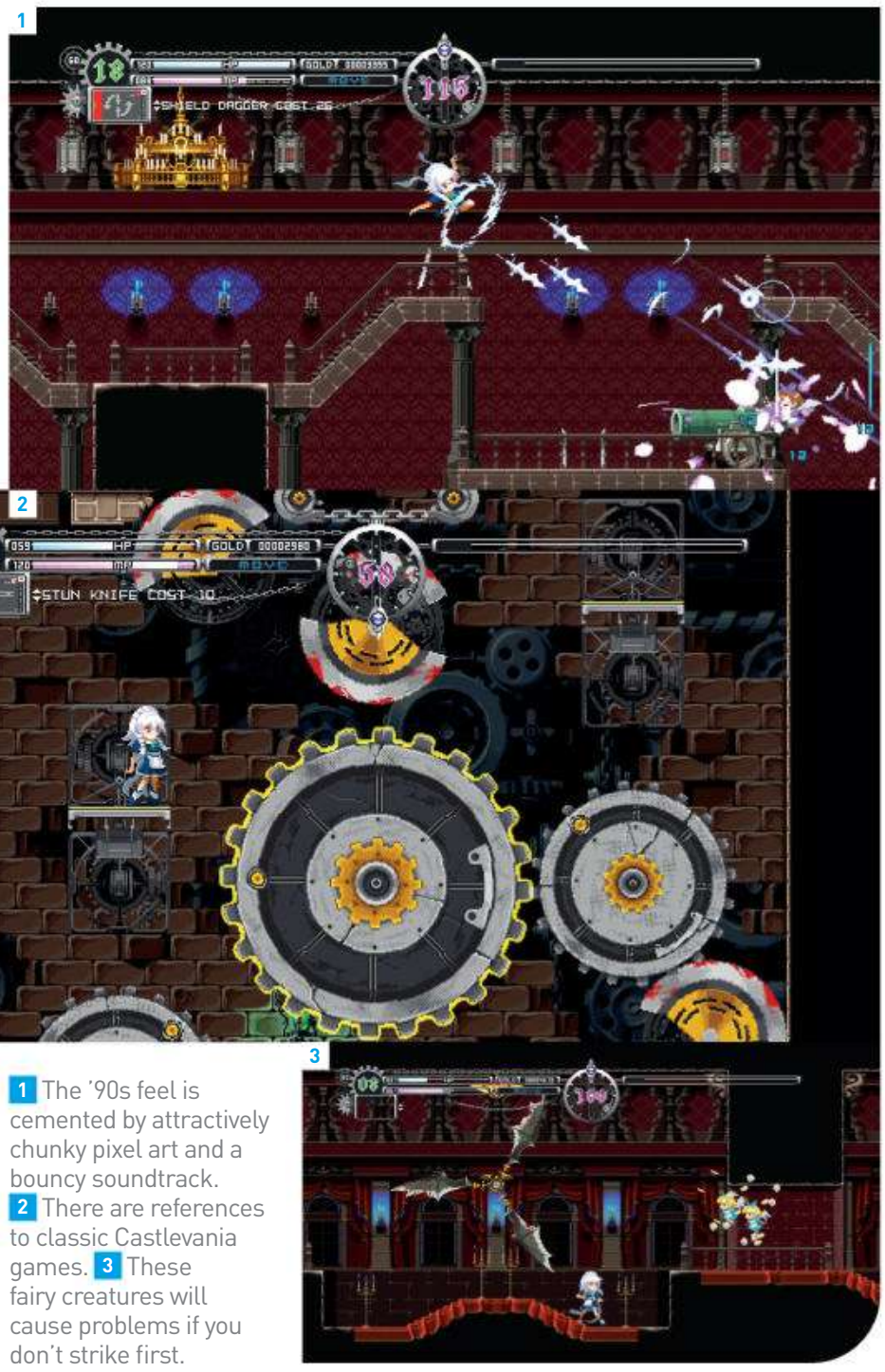
FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £11.49
ETA Out now
PUB Playism
DEV Team Ladybug
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 6+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Choice of language; adjustable volume, controller vibration, and control configuration

SHOW STOPPER

If this sounds par for the course, well, it is, but the familiarity means that Luna Nights slides on like a comfy pair of slippers. Sakuya sets a brisk pace, and since her main attack involves chucking daggers across the screen you can almost run-and-gun your way through early areas. The map, meanwhile, is a neat little thing made of uniform squares, so you shouldn't get lost or miss anything important here, enabling you to keep the momentum going.

More importantly, all the game's routine elements are given extra zing once Sakuya's time-stopping ability returns, and the further you go, the more you need to make the most of it. In combat its advantage is obvious, as you petrify the screen, run behind opponents, conjure up a cutlery drawer's worth of knives, and then unpause and watch them fly. But you'll also need it to get through obstacles, for example using it to solidify water (we're

> **The routine elements are given extra zing once Sakuya's time-stopping ability returns.**



1 The '90s feel is cemented by attractively chunky pixel art and a bouncy soundtrack. **2** There are references to classic Castlevania games. **3** These fairy creatures will cause problems if you don't strike first.

not sure about the science of that) and some increasingly thorny platforming sequences. Various colour-coded traps, hazards, and mechanical parts either continue moving when time is stopped, move in the opposite direction, or only move when time is stopped, so keep your wits about you.

OLD-SCHOOL RULES

Towards the end of the game, however, some such sequences can be rather trying, thanks to Luna Nights' habit of indulging traditions that have passed their best-before date. Getting knocked backwards when hit, for example, might send you falling back down a climb you've nearly completed, or off the current screen to the previous one, which causes any enemies you've just killed to instantly respawn (*always* annoying). Save and rest points are also sparse, forcing you to repeat lengthy sections if you fail, and many taxing gauntlets culminate in dead ends rather than looping around, so you have to survive a return journey too.

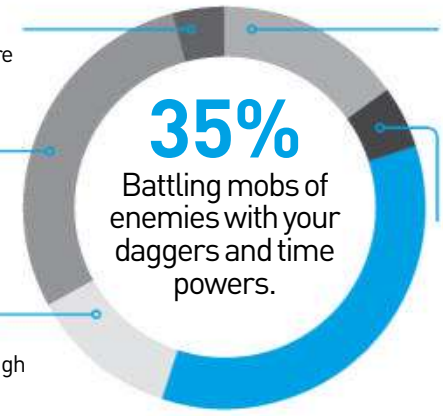
A few modern sensibilities might have smoothed off some of the traditional metroidvania's jagged edges, then, but otherwise this is a firm but fair challenge. Indeed, a series of tough-nut bosses with screen-sweeping attacks remain enjoyable to fight because such niggles are largely redundant in their simple open arenas. In short, as long as you have the patience for some harsh treatment, these should be nights to remember.

Stopping and starting time adds an extra dimension to this compact metroidvania. A fine palate cleanser between the likes of Ultros and Prince Of Persia. **Jon Bailes**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: TOUHOU LUNA NIGHTS



4% Grinding some XP to level up before the next boss.

29% Bending time to help navigate tricky platform puzzles.

12% Exploring the map and backtracking through previous areas.

15% Dying frequently while trying to master a boss's attack patterns.

5% Chewing the fat with witches, demons, and vampires.

HOW TO... AVOID RUNNING OUT OF MP

Chucking knives about costs MP, which recharges very slowly by default. To recharge MP (and a little HP), get used to 'grazing' enemies, which means moving in close without touching them. It's easier when they're frozen, of course, but you don't get as much juice for your efforts.

STATPACK

05
Themed areas to explore and conquer. Or at least that's how it seems. Our advice? Stick around after the credits for extra challenges.

60
Permanent collectibles to locate, including new moves, special skills, keys and stat boost items. Always check for breakable walls.

1K
Daggers thrown by Sakuya when using the aptly named 'Thousand Daggers' power. (Okay, not that we've actually counted them.)

LOVING/HATING

WITCH TIME
Boss battles against vampires and broomstick-riders can feel like a bullet-hell shooter at times, until you stop them in their tracks.

WHAT'S ON THE MENU
Ugly fonts and unintuitive layouts make item shopping and changing settings a pain. The map could do with more detail too.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Defeat 100 minor enemies for this bronze. Should be done in no time.

SILVER
Defeat Remilia. A tough duel with your childish vampire boss, but winnable.

GOLD
Beat the entire game without using any continues. Good luck with that.

Banishers: Ghosts Of New Eden

Something to raise your spirits?

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £49.99
ETA Out now
PUB Focus Entertainment
DEV Don't Nod
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 30 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; subtitle size options; speaker names; colours for speaker names; adjustable camera speed; toggle for motion blur

Not often do you hear someone say they should've stayed in England, but when Red mac Raith and Antea Duarte set foot in what is to become the United States in 1695 it's hardly a welcoming place owing to evil spirits roaming the land. That's nothing to write home about for the two Banishers, who are essentially early-age Ghostbusters.

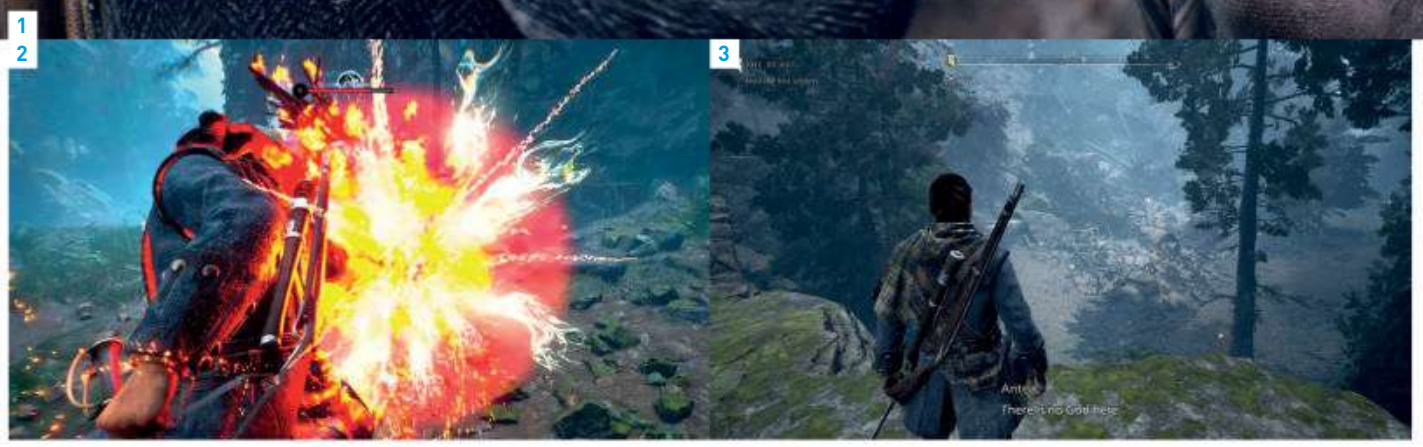
What seems like a simple enough business trip involving banishing a few ghosts and then taking the next ship home quickly turns out to be more difficult. The town of New Eden, an early settlement, is haunted by a powerful Nightmare that makes short work of both Red and Antea. Red barely survives, while his lover Antea returns to him as a ghost. As much as Red loves Antea, he's supposed to follow the Banisher credo of "life to the living, death to the dead" and send her to off to the next realm. However, there is another option – if Red kills enough people and gives their essence to Antea, he might yet be able to resurrect her. While you swear an oath to do either one or the other early on in the game, the decision is effectively postponed because doing either requires Antea's body, and it just so happens the Nightmare still has it.

BOO THIS MAN

Whether you fulfil your oath to Antea is completely up to you, but what you say in that early moment and whether you change your mind or not is probably *the* central decision in Banishers. Similar to Don't Nod's 2018 game Vampyr, along

Bustin' makes me feel meh, as Ray Parker Jr never sang.

> Don't Nod puts a lot of effort into worldbuilding, and presents a great exercise in magical realism.



1 When Antea dies during the course of her banishing duties, she starts to haunt Red out of sheer love. 2 The banish attack is a satisfying punch that never gets boring to use. 3 This is supposed to be an example of a harrowing scene. It's... debris.

the way you have to judge whether several people are permitted to live or die, and whether the ghosts you meet get to die peacefully or violently. Ascending a ghost allows them to make peace with death, whereas banishing is a more violent process. Don't Nod has put a lot of effort into worldbuilding. There's Banisher history, different types of ghosts, little notes on their relationship with witches – it's a great exercise in magical realism, which is funny when all this effort amounts to in action is a two-character combat system without an AI-controlled sidekick. Banishers is an action RPG with a fair few similarities to the Norse-set God Of War – you can see it in the close over-the-shoulder camera, the combat animations that make strikes feel heavy, and in the way there's a clear attempt never to cut away to a loading screen (which at the time of playing isn't always successful).

LIFTING SPIRITS

In combat you can switch quickly between Red and Antea with a press of △. Instead of a health bar Antea has a bar of spirit points, which are consumed with every action or hit she takes. She can't parry or block, but since she can't be killed it can be a good idea to switch to Antea when the going gets tough for Red. You can also learn a few combat skills that smoothly switch between the two. Still, as long as you take care to keep your equipment upgraded, Banishers barely poses a challenge, and Red and Antea's moves and enemy variety are both so limited that combat can turn into a slog.

To unlock skills with Antea, most of the time you have to kill people, since that is the most efficient way for her to gain the necessary upgrade points. While this is obviously supposed to give weight to your in-game decisions, as a player it feels weird to be penalised for making the 'right' decision, given combat gets more varied when you have more skills. With every successful hit he lands or takes, Red fills a banish meter. Once it's full, you get a banish special attack that can immediately take down most enemies around your level. He also acquires a musket, which is as much a tool for solving puzzles as it is a weapon – not quite the Leviathan Axe from GOW, but you lower plenty of bridges and unbolt doors using it.

OLD HAUNTS

Expect all the familiar open-world RPG trappings – you can clear out ghost nests and fight elite bosses, unlock collectibles and do some side-missions. Banishers dutifully includes it all, but due to the game's combat weaknesses it feels like busywork that really doesn't add to the experience. Everything is just a bit simple – the environment design is bland (though fans of grey caves will find much to enjoy), the combat is simple, and on the narrative side people seem more annoyed at being haunted than scared – granted, they are British, but for a ghost story all these elements lack friction and character. The same goes for the relationship

Expect all the familiar open-world RPG trappings like ghost nests and elite bosses.

4 Banishers' boss fights aren't too challenging, and the enemies get reused as elites. **5** Who needs detective vision when ghost vision can pick up spectral grafitti? **6** Antea learns an attack that blasts enemies aside and opens up new paths.

between Red and Antea – the game suggests they are lovers who would do anything for each other, but you don't often get the feeling of much love between the two. They're a couple yet somehow don't know anything about each other's likes, dislikes, family, or past experiences. Neither of them has much personality, either, which makes it difficult to care whether Antea lives or dies.

The best parts of Banishers are its haunting cases, missions where you help various haunted settlers. Hauntings feel like detective game cases in how you start by gathering evidence, then talk to the victim, and finally work out the personal tragedy that led to the haunting. Judging whether to sacrifice, banish, or ascend can be genuinely tricky, since every character and ghost has understandable motivations.

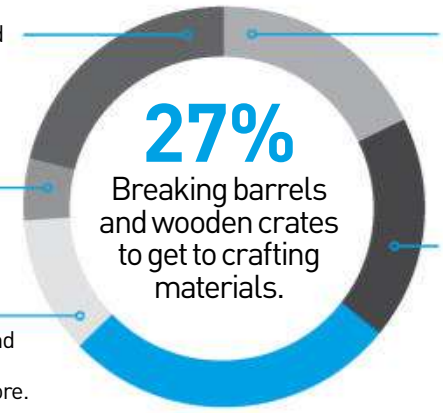
The main story can't keep up with these brilliant bits, and is thus easy to forget entirely. At the beginning, we are warned that Antea might lose herself, that her hunger may become uncontrollable, but we see nothing of that throughout the game, or even Red struggling with what he does or doesn't do for her. Your decisions lead to a variety of endings, but there are no intermediate consequences nor even much of a reaction to your actions, which is particularly disappointing in a Don't Nod game. Banishers has some great ideas, but it's missing a certain oomph that'd distinguish it – it's a serviceable action RPG, just not the great ghost love story with devastating decisions it's billed as.

Executes all common elements of open-world RPGs with confidence, but it falls short of the games it emulates and is weakened by its bland protagonists. **Malindy Hetfeld**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: BANISHERS: GONE



21% Being barked at by Antea to dodge, switch to her, attack, or don't attack.

5% Listening to someone talk about how thin the veil is.

11% Finding enough leather and linen to open an in-game fabric store.

18% Listening to the same dialogue every time Antea uses her powers to break through an obstacle.

18% Confusing barrels that can be broken with those that can't – there are that many.

HOW TO... CROSS GAPS WITH ANTEA

Sometimes a gap is too large for Red to jump across . Thankfully, there is ghostly energy around that Antea can harness (don't ask). By standing at the right angle to complete a symbol and pressing L1 she can teleport herself and Red across even the largest ravine.

FRIENDS & ENIEMIES

KATE
A community leader, along with her sister. However, she's hiding a devastating secret.

EVELYNNE
Doesn't believe in ghosts, or that she can be haunted. We've got bad news for her...

SIRIDEAN
This witch can see into the void between the worlds, and she needs you to go there.

SECOND OPINION MESSY MEDIUM

As someone who loves Vampyr, I was ready to banish this spectre. But after getting to know this couple as two worlds tear them apart, I'm not ready to give up this ghost after all. While it'll never be as slick as its triple-A influences, combat is satisfyingly mashy, and its world is lushly brought to life in both its visuals as well as its writing. I don't want to leave it all behind just yet. **Jess Kinghorn**

IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES

Absolutely. Vampyr is sort of a blueprint for Banishers, which took a lot of its systems and improved upon them.

NO

Absolutely not. The obvious parallels in systems with God Of War don't work in Banishers' favour.

YES

Twin Mirror couldn't deliver in terms of writing and lore, Banishers is much better at both.

It's not all relentless survival; you'll find things to customise your car inside and out.

Pacific Drive

More old banger than absolute banger

This is like Control, only the weirdness is out in the world instead of inside the FBC. Also, instead of a gun and supernatural powers you have a vehicle that needs constant attention. Okay, it's not *that* much like Control, apart from the atmosphere. It is, ironically, more like a temperamental old car that demands a little too much patience.

The premise is that, in an alternate recent past (and as something of a Chernobyl allegory), the development of an amazing new power source leads to a terrible accident, a government coverup, and a large exclusion zone. You end up stumbling into this zone where reality itself is warped and constantly changing, and all you have to help you survive is a car that's barely holding itself together and a few voices that communicate with you over the radio. Cue adventure.

BE MORE PACIFIC

For the first 10 to 15 hours, Pacific Drive is a very enjoyable experience. Roguelike and survival elements are melded to create something captivating and utterly unique. Procedural generation means that you can never be entirely sure what you'll meet each time you leave your garage. As you're in a car, rather than passing through rooms or levels each run consists of a series of junctions or highways, becoming progressively more dangerous as you approach ground zero.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Kepler Interactive
DEV Ironwood Studios
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 35-45 hrs (no assists)
ACCESSIBILITY Wide range of visual settings; camera autocentre options; colourblind modes; increase loot highlighting; adjustable stick sensitivity; gameplay modifiers inc player and car damage on/off; invert look; toggle crouch and sprint on/off; customisable controls and more

Anomalies – enemies (of a sort) or hazards – include metal creatures that attack your car, static elements that can be avoided, and dangers that suddenly rise from the ground or hurtle from the sky. Add in random weather conditions and varying levels of radiation, and the atmosphere tends to be strong and tense. Initially at least you'll be driving very carefully, trying to identify the strange, unexplained sounds that surround you everywhere.

While your car starts off only slightly more durable than a bank vault made out of Twiglets, you slowly unlock upgrades to toughen it up, and even some futuristic defence systems. Each individual part of your car can and will take damage, which means gathering resources to craft replacements. You need to raid buildings and salvage scrap parts from abandoned vehicles – keeping an eye on your surroundings for danger all the while – and make it back to the garage. This involves grabbing 'anchors' for energy (the removal of which makes the area even more dangerous), then activating an escape gate somewhere on the map which triggers a battle-royale-style storm for you to outdrive.

Failing a run, especially in the mid to late game, can bring everything crashing down. Failure means your painstakingly gathered pile of loot is wiped out (you might

> **Each individual part of your car can and will take damage, which means gathering resources.**

1 These things are creepy, but at least they don't move. Well not at first... **2** One wrecked car regenerates at the garage after each run, waiting to be scrapped. **3** Some anomalies only rise from the ground when you get close.

retain a handful of items if you're lucky), while all damage to the car persists. The main problem with this is that as you progress, the length of a typical run gradually increases.

DEEP SEA DRIVER

Playing for 45 minutes only to end up with nothing more than a badly damaged car that requires a large amount of resources to fully fix is annoying at best and thoroughly demoralising at worst. It doesn't help that Pacific Drive often struggles to communicate the intricacies of play or even to let you know precisely what you're supposed to be doing. Not great when your fuel and battery charge are rapidly dwindling and the storm's on its way without being summoned.

We must praise the inclusion of some significant gameplay modifiers, which can be combined to effectively activate a God mode. However, turning some on – even some of the mild ones – disables trophies, which we think sends the wrong message about accessibility settings. None of them make the game more technically sound. Not only is the framerate shaky, we encounter bugs such as car parts disappearing at the garage and invincible scrappable items, and in one damning instance we abandon a lengthy run as we're unable to get back into our car.

This is just a few updates away from being special. Squash those bugs! Tone down the punishment! Explain the systems better! This starts to skid well before the finish line.

In desperate need of repair work, Pacific Drive is a patchwork of glorious, memorable moments held together by the duct tape of frustration and technical issues. **Luke Kemp**

6 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: PACIFIC DRIVE

12% Wanting to cry because a run ended in resource-crushing disaster.

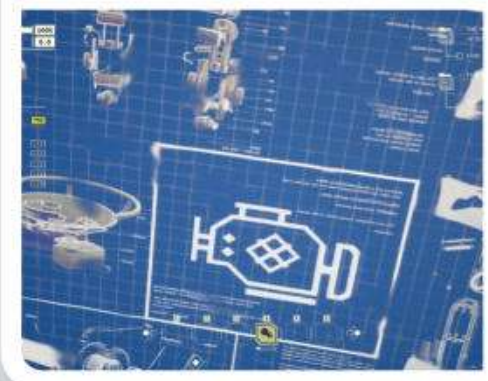
28% Driving along the road, considering a risky detour through rough terrain.

6% Enjoying the rush of a gate escape that you only just managed.

10% Congratulating yourself on a fruitful, exhilarating, well-judged offroading detour.

10% Cursing yourself over a terrible, damage-laden, ill-judged offroading detour.

HOW TO... UNLOCK BLUEPRINTS



It's not made clear, but you need to visit the Fabrication Station at the garage regularly in order to unlock new blueprints (look for the yellow tabs). Check prerequisites carefully, as you'll sometimes need to grab one blueprint in order to make another available. Then get crafting!

THE DUALSENSE DIFFERENCE

HAPTIC FEEDBACK
Shakes across the controller really sell the sense of an imperfectly constructed car, although they're a *little* too strong.

ADAPTIVE TRIGGERS
R2 and L2 give gentle resistance to emulate the accelerator and brake pedals, and give extra shudder when something's wrong.

LOVING/HATING

ATMOSFEAR
The bizarre sounds and sights along your route combine to create a convincingly strange, fascinating, and dangerous world.

ACCESS DENIED
There are fantastic accessibility options, but why disable trophies? And why is there no toggle for the controller vibration?

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Manage to hit yourself with your own car, and unlock this. Erm... congratulations?

SILVER
Complete a run of at least three junctions without leaving the car in Park.

GOLD
Unlock everything at the Fabrication Station. This is going to take a *long* time.

Granblue Fantasy: Relink

Leaving us feeling anything but blue, we declare this gran-tastic

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £49.99
ETA Out now
PUB Cygames
DEV Cygames
PLAYERS 1 (offline), 2-4 (online)
LENGTH 15 hrs (main story)
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; assist mode; auto dash, auto targeting and blur on/off; colourblind modes; adjustable music, effects, and dialogue volume; adjustable difficulty and camera sensitivity; invert Y and X axes, vibration and screen shake on/off; swap guard and lock-on buttons; game profile public or private

The world on the verge of destruction? A magical damsel in distress? A sword as tall and wide as a fridge-freezer? Must be an RPG! Although this series is now ten years old, it's thus far failed to make much of an impact in most English-speaking countries. This might end up being the game to change that.

It can't be denied that Granblue Fantasy: Relink hits a lot of very familiar story beats: the fragile-looking child with enormous power; the mysterious swordsman; the mother figure named Lilith who threatens the very nature of existence itself; and the My Little Pony-style messaging about the power of friendship to name a few. Nonetheless, it's all wrapped up in a story with the cohesion and charm that a surprising number of RPGs fail to achieve.

Set in a world where people live on floating islands in the sky, it's a straightforward tale of friendship and redemption that nonetheless has some minor gaps for newcomers that can be filled in via 'Fate Episodes', a slightly awkward solution which involves walls of text narrated by the relevant character. While an inelegant fix, it otherwise allows the primary storytelling to remain crisp and clear at all times. It is one of many, many examples of the developers doing everything possible to ease players of any experience into the game's skybound setting and allow them to enjoy their time there.

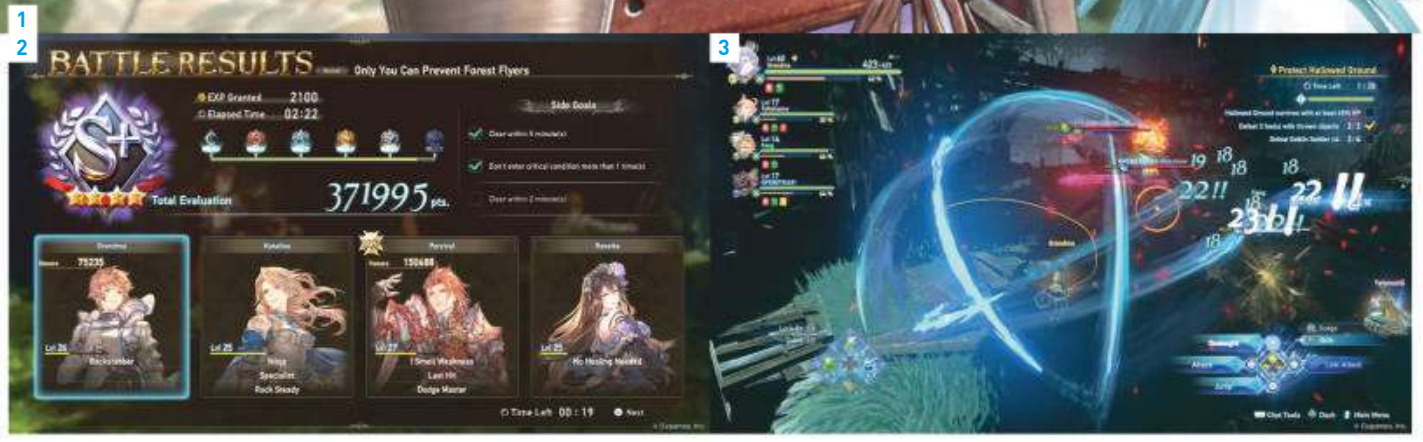
There are (initially) three difficulty levels that you can switch between throughout, but that's actually quite far down the list of reasons this game is welcoming. The use of real-time combat instantly negates the need to learn the intricacies of a convoluted system, and while the combat is simple at the most fundamental level – basic attacks rely solely on ◎ and △ – there is a depth and variety to it that you're gently introduced to.

LIQUORICE ALL SWORDS

You can block and dodge, and perfectly timing either grants temporary invincibility. Holding R1

Nothing says 'the power of friendship' like walloping people with ruddy great swords.

Real-time combat instantly negates the need to learn the intricacies of a convoluted system.



1 There's an underlying positivity to it all that comes across as charming rather than irritating. 2 Side-quests have a performance evaluation at the end. Online, this means brief bragging rights. 3 Helping out newer players is encouraged via Quick Quest, with rewards for late-game players.

gives you access to your special abilities, which work on a cooldown (four at a time are available during play, plus you'll unlock more to swap in and out), and understanding exactly what they do and when to use them becomes more important as things become tougher. There is then *another* layer of play that relies on and encourages co-operation between your team of four.

Land enough hits on an enemy to fill their stun meter and you're able to initiate a Link attack, where other members of your party can join in and whale on them if they're quick enough. Link attacks are one way to fill your team's Link level. When this hits 100%, if you all successfully jump in with a Link attack, time temporarily slows for enemies while your health regenerates and special abilities recharge faster.

It's at this point that we need to jump to the issue of multiplayer. Successful Link attacks with other people feel more meaningful and satisfying than pulling them off with CPU allies, as does the strategic use of Skybound Arts (SBAs) – each character's ultimate attack, the meter for which slowly builds up during fights. As the story teaches you, the more SBAs that are quickly chained together, the more devastating the effect, especially on bosses. When playing online, therefore, it's always worth thinking twice before unleashing your own. *Yours* might be ready, but what about everybody else's?

Completion of the slickly-produced story is in a sense only the beginning of the game.

Online or offline, and whether you've played three hours or 300, everybody can enjoy the ability to play as any available character. 'Captain' must be in your party during the offline story (you can change the default name of Djeeta or Gran – and so we've given our captain his full name of Grandma), but you don't have to be controlling him or her. You'll slowly unlock more characters both during and after the story, and each is unique.

SUPER GRAN

The default Captain is a bit of an all-rounder sword user, with his/her attacks and combos following a familiar taptaptap flurry on the face buttons. Percival, meanwhile, is a little slower but tends to hit heavier, while Ferry's whip allows you simply to hold a single button down to attack constantly. Then there are characters that specialise in attacking from a distance, characters with unique systems to supplement their power, and one character unlocked upon completion of the story who is not only enormous fun to play as, but will most likely change how you approach combat a little.

Completion of the slickly-produced story mode – full of visual spectacle and lots of (mostly) varied boss fights – is in a sense only the beginning of the game. The postgame RPG grind tends to prompt a significant percentage of players to abandon the game, but we think the retention rate will be much higher here. For one thing, levelling up becomes *easier* at this stage, not harder. Partly this is because you'll have access to repeatable quests that offer juicy bundles of

Caring Man
You need to stop putting yourself down like that. Hubris is bad, sure, but a little self-confidence never hurt anyone
Story Log
Glossary

4 Not only is the game fun to play, it offers some great life advice too! Be more confident! 5 It's a very linear game, but there's always a new environment or huge boss waiting. 6 Don't be fooled by this boss; she's small but mighty.

experience, partly because at this stage every now and then you earn consumables that instantly award a chunk of XP.

Characters level up individually, and they each have their own skill tree (points for which are generously heaped upon you in the postgame) that unlocks stat boosts and additional abilities. Each character also has their own unique weapons to be forged, levelled up, and uncapped. That in turn requires certain materials, which necessitates a mixture of quest completion and engagement with the in-game economy (all earnable shinies, no microtransactions).

WAKE UP, RELINK!

We do have to say, however, that referring to 'quests' from the town quest counter as such seems overly generous, given their short length and limited depth. They're actually tasks that take place within a very small area, such as a boss fight or defence mission. These represent the only part of the game which can be played with other people. While it's a little disappointing that there's no story co-op, then, there's nonetheless something special about knowing it's real people helping you out.

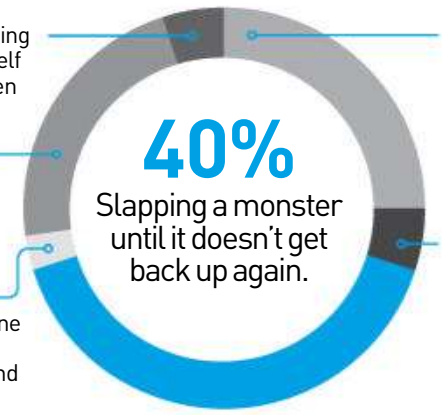
Fundamentally, this is a game that feels as bright as it looks. An incredibly generous timer when your character or one of the others is downed, the ability to enter quests overlevelled or underlevelled as you wish, and a strong emphasis on teamwork mean that grind fatigue is so far away in those blue skies that we can't even see it.

A beautifully designed, accessible RPG with a postgame more appealing than most. A great example of developers handing you just the right amount of control. Luke Kemp

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: GF: RELINK



5% Furiously tapping ⊗ to revive yourself while downed, keen to exact revenge.

22% Playing online, trying to think of a new word because 'grind' isn't right.

3% Failing to connect to an online game, shrugging your shoulders, and trying again.

25% Playing tactically while barely realising it, being careful with abilities and SBAs.

5% Wandering the menus equipping, swapping, upgrading, and uncapping bits and bobs.

MULTIPLAYER

Playing online is enormous fun, though in the early days of release we ran into some connection issues both with friends and with random players. That may be fixed by the time you read this, but there's probably still no way to stick with a random team, which is a shame.

STATPACK

02
Towns, which act as safe hubs for NPC requests, weapon forging as well as upgrades, and the cute little knick-knack shack merchant.

12
Extra characters can be recruited via the use of Crewmate Cards. These cards are rare, so think carefully about each choice you make!

100
Is the character level cap. It sounds high, but it's possible to finish the story without getting even halfway to it, should you so wish.

SECOND OPINION GRAN FAN

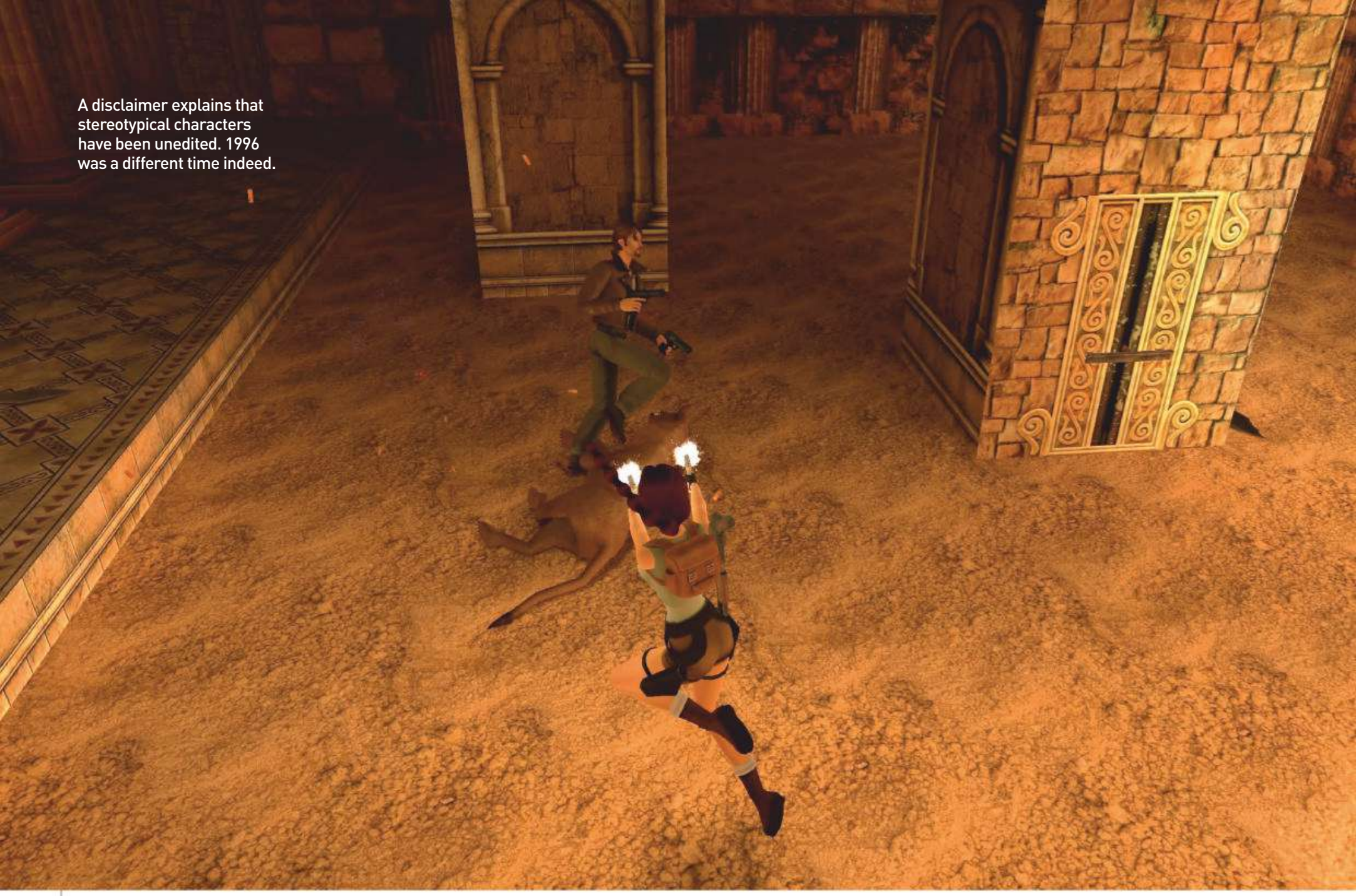
As a fan of the mobile game, it's been great to see the series brought to life first through a great ArcSys fighting game, and now this multiplayer character action title. While Relink boasts plenty of its own fun-to-learn combos, it's also simply a joy to get hang out with these characters across a full action RPG – a big step up from the two-dimensional mobile source material. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

IS IT BETTER THAN?

Some nice ideas, but technical issues and an obsession with loot let D&D: Dark Alliance down.

No multiplayer, but the superhero crew in Midnight Suns deliver more fun teamups and superior storytelling.

Not the disaster some believe, but Gotham Knights is outshone by Granblue Fantasy: Relink on every level.



A disclaimer explains that stereotypical characters have been unedited. 1996 was a different time indeed.

Tomb Raider I-III Remastered

Is Lara's original trilogy just a relic itself these days?

Back in 1996, Tomb Raider was revolutionary. It's hard to imagine a time before 3D adventure games, but this was the first one. Defining an entire genre on the first attempt, original developer Core Design made a game for the ages. The trouble is, it really has been ages. 27 years, in fact. So here's that game plus its two sequels and three expansions, beautifully remastered.

The quality of the graphical remastering itself is absolutely stellar. The original games are genuinely running underneath everything, so while the environments have lovely lighting, 3D foliage, and super-high-resolution textures, it's all just dressing up the original geometry from 1996 to 1998. So that means huge rectangles (and then almost-as-huge triangles), giving everything an angular look despite the fact it all looks so slick in 4K it could almost pass for a modern release. Best of all, you can hit the Menu button at any time (including during CGI cutscenes and menu screens) and the whole game reverts to 30fps and the old graphics, albeit running without staircased edges or slowdown. It's utterly brilliant, though sometimes you'll switch to the old graphics just to see the ledges and items more clearly. Oh, the irony.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Aspyr Media,
DEV Aspyr, Crystal Dynamics, Core Design
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 150+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; control remapping

TANK GIRL

But then there are the controls. Tank controls – the way Lara always used handle – are enabled by default. That means digitally, on the D-pad. ↑ runs forwards, not 'into the screen'. Couple that with the level design working on a strict, cleverly disguised grid layout, and you've got a hyper-precise 3D traversal system that simply wasn't designed for the new Modern control layout. Backward jumps? Forget them – Lara spins on the spot. It may well be easier to run around flat ground with the left stick, but climbing is nothing like in Uncharted and combat is a mess. Even pulling a switch is hard, not only because 'action' and 'pull lever' are now on separate buttons, but because just getting Lara to face a wall head-on is a nightmare. If you can't learn to use the old controls, frankly don't bother. It's hard enough without modernity's imprecision.

All three games are also very frustrating. Despite the great retexturing and varied levels, you really have to become engrossed in the adventure or it will quickly become dull. Some of the first game's levels can take hours to solve, but III is famous for keeping gamers stuck for literally months at a time. And given the new visuals are so dark compared to the classic mode (for III in particular), you can miss an otherwise obvious keyhole and wander about for a whole hour.

1 In TRII, Lara will blast humans with a grenade launcher. Doesn't sit right. **2** Occasionally you meet an untriggered, static enemy like this gorilla. Say 'cheese', pal! **3** Switching to 1996's texture mapping shows just how far we've come.

That's not fun. Also not fun is the lack of autosaves, so unless you get used to saving (and you won't want to, given the game counts your saves, as though it's going to thrash you with the number later), you can expect mega-infuriating deaths, sometimes enough to make you rage-quit. TRI doesn't have too many sudden deathtraps, but II has many. And III seems deliberately obtuse with its bloated level design. That game has *not* aged well.

MIDAS TOUCH

The original, however, has aged beautifully. Get used to its systems and it's still wonderful, well worth the entry fee on its own. The atmospheric music is still best-in-class, many levels are all-timers (Lost Valley and St Francis' Folly are standouts) and the sense of awe and isolation is simply not evoked by modern equivalents.

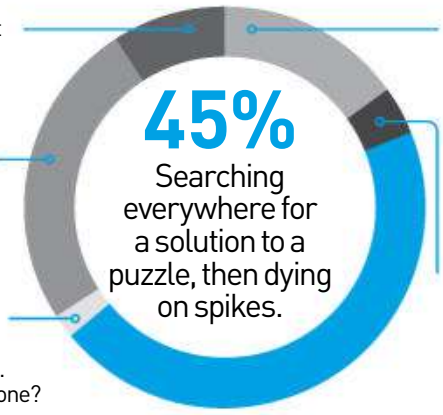
Barring some dreadful 'parallax textures' on ladders in TRII's new graphics, the ill-fitting Modern controls, lack of autosave, and a missing 'flare' button, the core remastering here is a huge success. Whether new players will persevere with the games' increasing frustrations is debatable, but the exquisite retexturing has certainly made the creaking original palatable again. Forget hoping for an Uncharted-alike; Tomb Raider is a 'game' in the truest sense of the word. Puzzling, challenging, and built on rock-solid rules, it's finally as beautiful as we imagined it was 27 years ago. Try it.

Literally the old games running under new skin. The Modern controls are dreadful and III is stretched and frustrating, but the first game remains a masterpiece. Justin Towell

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: TR I-III REMASTERED



9% Explaining that 'they didn't have enough polys left for her ponytail'.

25% Wondering where 27 years have gone. All this was just roughly textured fields.

2% Swearing you had saved after collecting two keys. Where have they gone?

15% Shooting endangered/extinct animals in the face, including the world's last T-Rex couple.

4% Switching between old and new graphics. On... off. On... off. On/off/on/off/on etc.

HOW TO... FIND TRII'S TWIN T-REXES

In the first level, don't get on the zipline. Look down over the ridge – there's a notch cut into the cliff. Backwards-hop off above the left-most edge of the notch and hang. Drop and grab at the notch; shimmy right and climb up. Finally, go through the tunnel and climb down the ladder to the cavern.

STATPACK

40
Pages of EULA to agree to before you can play anything. Fun times. We're pretty sure we didn't have this to deal with in the last century.

95
Million copies of Tomb Raider games have been sold to date, across all titles. Could this rerelease tip that figure over 100 million?

52
Main levels to beat across all three games, plus two secret levels, three expansion packs and three training levels. Fridge the butler!

LOVING/HATING

MODEL CITIZEN
Lara can't really sit on Midas' hand during the game, for (hopefully) obvious reasons. Just one reason why the poses in photo mode rock.

SNOW JOKE
Like a mouse taking bait, Lara heads for an item to collect and then BOOM! A giant snowball out of nowhere. Insta-kills suck.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Smash a glass window in Tomb Raider II by jumping through it. Easy but fun.

SILVER
Finish TRI in under five hours. That's a big ask for such an involved game.

PLATINUM
There are no golds, and there's only a platinum for the PS4 version. What gives?

Don't judge on appearances, even if it's a scary sentient tree.

Lil' Guardsman

On your merry way

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB Versus Evil
DEV Hilltop Studios
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 5 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Fully subtitled – screen languages include English, Chinese, and Spanish

Forced to cover her dad's shift working as a guard at the castle gate, 12-year-old Lil has had a big responsibility thrust on her. It's her task to size up the fantasy folk who are seeking entry to the kingdom of the Sprawl and either admit them or boot their butts out the door. It's silly, lighthearted, and will have you chuckling from the start of your shift until you clock out.

It's the kind of job that could easily feel dull, but Lil' Guardsman manages to find the fun in quizzing a bunch of quirky oddballs. You need to question each character as they approach your gate, and if you're suspicious of their intentions you can bust out your upgradable magical gadgets to reveal more about them. You've got a powerful arsenal on you including truth spray, a decoder ring, and a metal detector. You can also use the phone to ring the Sprawl's official advisers to validate the would-be entrant's story, or to catch them in a lie. If you believe them and everything checks out, let them through; if you don't you can turn them away or even chuck them in jail.

The deduction puzzles involve you using a combination of these options, and with only three action points per visitor you need to read the situation and choose which option seems most appropriate to each individual. They're fun brainteasers, and with flamboyant, cartoony designs and a fully voice-acted cast each encounter feels full of fantastical life. You meet a succession of sweet old ladies, necromantic mages, blood gold smugglers, and (our favourite) two goblins stuffed in a trench coat. Gotta respect the hustle.

GATEKEEPING

If you don't quite manage to suss out a character you can rewind time and replay individual encounters or even entire levels. It's a smart addition as it means you don't have to worry too much about making the 'right' decision on the first try and can explore fun dialogue options or comical tool interactions without the headache of being locked into your choices.

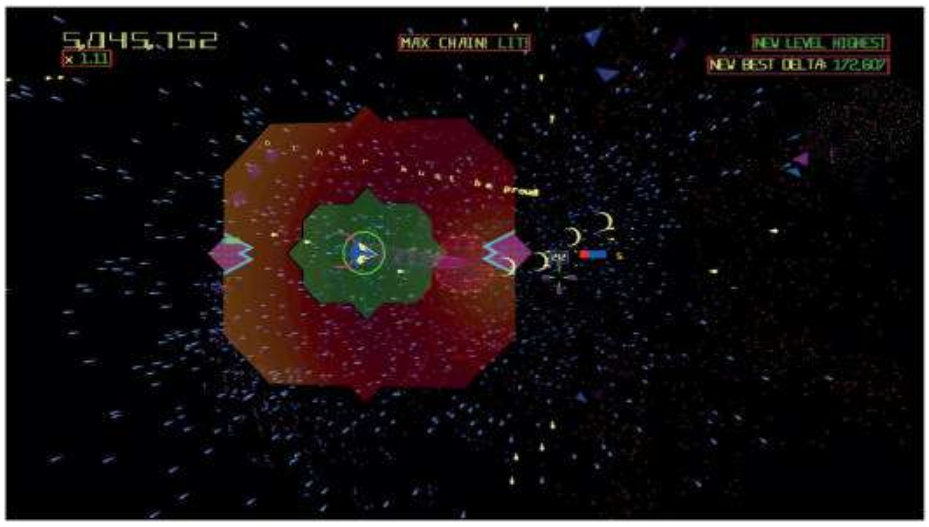
When they pass through your gate, it's not the final time you see those you admit. They become part of the fabric of the world and so you see them out about the city in between your shifts. What's cool is that with a simple yes or no you're not only deciding the fate of these characters but also the future of the city as a whole. The Kingdom's alliances, royal betrothals, and underground revolutions all depend upon your choices. It's all handled in a lighthearted fashion, but seeing the way your decisions affect the wider story makes you want to replay levels and explore each story route. A never-ending work shift sounds like hell, but if the job is anything like in Lil' Guardsman, sign us up.

> **You're not only deciding the fate of these quirky characters but also the future of the city.**

The stress of Papers Please translated into a more laidback and fun puzzler. Player choice gives this pocket-sized adventure bigger scope for story. **Rachel Watts**

8
PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5, PS4, PSVR2 **PRICE** £11.19
ETA 8 March (PS5, PSVR2), out now (PS4) **PUB** Atari **DEV** Llamasoft **PLAYERS** 1



Akka Arrh

The psychedelic GOAT?

You'd be forgiven for not knowing what is happening the first time you play this. The original Atari game was, after all, a prototype that was never officially released as it was deemed too difficult by testers. To an extent the psychedelic visuals of Llamasoft's remake are even more obfuscating, but if you stick with it, it does eventually fall into place.

It's essentially a shooter-slash-tower-defence; your goat-head thing in the middle can drop bombs to destroy enemies, with fallen foes creating shockwaves that hit other enemies, the chain reaction potentially endless. Some enemies can't be destroyed this way, so you have to take them down with bullets earned from bombed enemies. This creates a tension where you have to be smart with ammo while trying not to drop another bomb as this will reset your score multiplier, all while hopefully surviving each increasingly maddening level without losing all your health pods.

The top-down perspective means it's not immediately apparent that you're actually a tower, but you can go downstairs using L2 to stop enemies who've infiltrated your base before they make off with one of your pods. With sometimes a lot to take in visually and aurally, at least the 'Achtung' warning and the airhorn when your base is safe is pretty clear.

UPSTAIRS, DOWNAIRS

If the psychedelic presentation can be distracting, after a few attempts you just give into the chaos and slip into a trippy flow state. The beauty is that if you can drop one bomb at the right place at the right time, it almost plays itself as you enjoy the light show while racking up sometimes hundreds of bullets. However, aiming with the cursor can prove tricky, especially when trying to blast incoming projectiles from one angle and then doing a 180 to counter another encroaching threat.

After a few attempts you just give into the chaos and slip into a trippy flow state.

It may not be as intuitive to pick up and play as Llamasoft's last VR shooter, Polybius, but Akka Arrh is nonetheless a bona fide Jeff Minter joint that gives a lost arcade game a heck of a fanfare – or airhorn, more like.

Definitely an acquired taste. It takes a while to make sense of, but once it clicks, it becomes a trippy arcade shooter that gets right inside your head. **Alan Wen**

7 PLAY

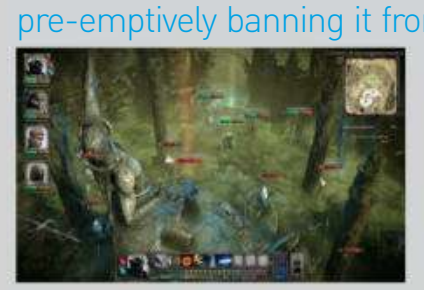
THREE TO PLAY

PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't make the cut. This month we're throwing it back, flipping it around, and donning the nostalgia goggles for three titles playing with familiar beats.

Up first is **Arzette: The Jewel Of Faramore**, which plays like an inside joke that is particularly tricky to explain in a PlayStation-focussed publication. Perhaps all we'll say is, yes, it's referencing what you think it is and the developer is even called Seedy Eye Software. Pitched as a lost action adventure from a bygone era, it's tricky to say how much those not already in on the joke will get out of this. Either way, the over-the-top camp charm of the overall presentation (particularly the animated cutscenes and voice acting) is difficult to resist, to say nothing of the opportunity to play as a badass, sword-wielding princess in this retro throwback. They hardly ever made 'em quite like this, even when they were still making 'em.

Next on the menu is **PlateUp!**, a restaurant management game with a roguelite twist that's even more stressful than remembering how to properly punctuate around that title. Offering co-op for up to four players, you can all work together in designing your eatery, serving dishes, and making the kitchen work for *you*. Procedurally-generated settings make this a little different from similar-looking four-player co-op games like Catastronauts. However, as we've yet to recover from the great Overcooked! icebreaker incident of 2017, we're pre-emptively banning it from PLAY Towers.



Speaking of decrees from upon high, our final game is **King Arthur: Knight's Tale**. Are you ready to party up like it's 1999? Not quite going full Frank Fazetta in its visual direction, this turn-based tactics hybrid falls a bit on the drearier side of dark fantasy, with a decidedly muted colour palette. Given it recasts legendary tales of chivalry with just a bit of an edge – you play as King Arthur's nemesis Mordred – you may well have heard this one before. Still, as it also gives you a great big fantasy realm to fight through and plenty of character options for your knight-in-somewhat-grubby-armour, we can't fault the comforting groove of this gameplay loop – even as we have our backsides handed to us again and again by gnarly looking foes and fiends alike.

Foamstars

RSVP 'maybe' to this foam party

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Square Enix
DEV Toylogic
OFFLINE REVIEW N/A
PLAYERS 8
CROSSPLAY PS5, PS4

There's no getting around this being a loving homage to/shameless ripoff of Nintendo's colourful inkslinging shooter Splatoon, albeit here your task is to spray gaudy foam to win. Initially you're trying to foam up as much territory as possible to make navigating the arena easier. You can surf speedily on the foam of your team colour, while walking in the other team's foam slows you down to a pathetic trudge.

So far, so Splatoon, even if foam does behave mildly differently to that game's ink. For one thing, it can pile up if you concentrate your fire, creating ramps and blockades. It's an interesting dynamic that ends a bit of extra depth, but nothing to get too sudded up over. The bigger difference is that this is much more of a traditional shooter. Hit your foes with enough foam and they'll suddenly be trapped in a sphere of the stuff. Surf into that sphere and boom, that's a kill! (Sorry, 'chill' in the game's often-tiresome terminology). Surfing into opponents for finishers is great, as is surfing into your downed teammates to revive them. It's joyous when you're in full flow, surfing around the arena smoothly chaining kills and saves.

> Surfing into rivals for finishers is great, as is surfing into downed teammates to revive them.

BUBBLE TROUBLE

Tactically it's all about judging when to enter the fight. Reloading your foam-gun takes

A similiar amount of foam poured from our mouths when we saw the cosmetics bundle that cost *£36.99*.

CHARACTERS

01

Dual-pistol-toting Soa is the first character you play as. Her main 'thing' is that she hosts an insipid radio show while she fights. Well, *barely*. She doesn't so much deal death as deal in dead air.

02

Spellcheck hates ΔGITO almost as much as we do, and his shotgun is no compensation. A grating depiction of a 'pro-gamer' that's so excruciating you'll consider packing gaming in and getting into opera.

03

Mel T gets a few points for being one of the game's stronger puns (certainly better than the setting being called 'Bath Vegas' – what?). Her distant shots are great for more strategic battlers too.

approximately 500 years and you can't surf while doing it. This is clearly by design, and deciding when to reload or when to zip around the arena surf-smacking into foamed players is a nice constant dilemma.

Once a team has managed a set number of kills, a player on the opposing team becomes their star player. When the star player is defeated, that team loses. In some matches we find our star player is exposed in no time at all, only for them to be so efficient at surfing and dodging around the arena that we are able to turn the tables. Occasionally we get a tedious game where two star players camp at either end of the map, but mostly this is good, chaotic, fast-paced stuff.

However, despite all that Foamstars is very insubstantial for the price. The dreadful single-player game is just a series of dull waves of grunts – this is not a game to play by yourself. The 'Happy Friyay' weekly event is even worse, an overlong multiplayer demo for an upcoming character whose awful, horribly-written schtick goes on forever. Friyay? This has us longing for Monday. You're also constantly nudged towards buying overpriced stuff with real money. The fact this dropped on PlayStation Plus, making it free to subscribers for a month is a sly way to hide how free-to-play it feels. £24.99 for a pretty good, very greedy multiplayer shooter is taking a certain liquid that sure as anything ain't foam. (Wait, is foam a liquid? Well, you get our point.)

There's fun here, and you can maybe add a point if you got this for 'free' on PS Plus. May be worth checking on later, when hopefully it's scrubbed up a bit. **Abbie Stone**

5
PLAY

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Baldur's Gate 3

Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and 'yes, and-ing' your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.

02

Resident Evil 4

Neither losing sight of its legacy or Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03

Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

06

Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

07

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

08

Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake's final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

09

Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade

Cloud and the gang get a glow up with better visuals and slicker combat that Limit Breaks this bold reimagining of the Midgar section. Yuffie joins in with an extra story that bridges the gap between this and what's to come, cleverly playing on nostalgia and fan expectation.

10

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

11

Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking, new weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy's use of ray tracing is among the best we've seen. The sole problem is you're able to pick only one of two visual options.

12

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

13

Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

14

NEW

Tekken 8

Boasting a roster of returning favourites alongside new faces, and introducing mechanics that make every bout snappier, this fighter hits hard and fast. Looking better than ever only on current-gen hardware, busting out your Wind God Fist has never before felt so satisfying.

15

Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

16

Final Fantasy XVI

With a mixture of DMC-like action and a mature story peppered with wonderfully deployed regional slang (like 'nowt's) this reinvention feels fresh while also building on past entries' themes. Lacking quirky edges, it's almost too polished – but it's still a treat.

17

Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

18

Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

19

Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

20

Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

21

Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

22 NEW

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

In a hop, skip, and a time-warping jump, this once-beloved series has parkoured its way back into our hearts with a new protagonist, Sargon. Movement and combat both possess layers that are a joy to peel back throughout this metroidvania return-to-form.

23

EA Sports FC 24

FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

24

Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty

A soulslike without stamina? It's just one of the many clever twists in this Ancient Chinese epic where qi governs your actions instead. Go on a tear, and positive energy (for you, not your dead foes) helps you keep the momentum going. Just don't let negative energy build.

25

Marvel's Midnight Suns

Mushroom-foraging friendship dates, a book club with Blade, and the Sorcerer Supreme's suspiciously small swimming trunks – this one's got it all. A deep affection for all things Marvel runs through this deck building RPG, and the writing and social mechanics charm.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5

Final Fantasy XVI delivered an eikonic smackdown that still reverberates throughout our hall of fame. High fantasy stakes plus a combat system with a light character action flavour is a winning formula. If you're hungry for more, take a look at these three other legends.

PICK #1

The Legend Of Dragoon

One heck of a demake-over

Big beasties? Check. A few fresh twists on combat? Check. Ostentatious transformations? Check. This RPG from Japan Studio is not only one of few 2001 titles playable on modern hardware, but a necessary pitstop for genre fans. Random encounters unfold in a turn-based format, but smashing QTEs adds extra damage. Collecting Dragon Spirits and nailing timed inputs allows your party to turn into Dragoon forms later for special moves. It's nowhere near as slick or responsive as FFXVI, naturally, but it's a relic worth playing.

PICK #2

Final Fantasy XIV

Gather your party

If FFXVI's AI-controlled companions left you wanting, may we suggest a quest with online chums? This MMORPG has gone from strength to strength. Combat here is slower-paced, with a greater focus on positioning. For instance, Black Mages must stay put while casting spells, leaving them vulnerable; best bring along your Sage pal who enjoys battlefield healing, and that Dark Knight who charges around with a target on their back. Thanks to a robust selection of jobs, there's something for everyone.

PICK #3

Devil May Cry 5

Throwing up the horns

We couldn't forget about this heavy hitter, and honestly it's a crying shame these sons of Sparda no longer dwell within our hallowed halls of fame. When it comes to character action, this remains one of the best examples ever, offering multiple characters to get to grips with – including one who'd rather read poetry than throw down directly. Still just as satisfying to jump into now as when it first came crashing onto PS4 in 2019, we probably wouldn't have Final Fantasy XVI in as we know it without DMC5.

Favourite faces return, knowing some new tricks. The sons of Sparda know how to throw down.

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous, realistic western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. With train robberies, tootin' headshots, and racists to kill, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.

02

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upped to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04

The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05

Dreams

This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is a epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the table for all the delicious lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13

Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14

Resident Evil 2

Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 *and* PS4.

15

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

17

Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

18

Nier: Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demands* it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

19

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

20

Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

21

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

22

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

23

Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary... and then get killed by it.

24

Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

25

Tekken 7: Definitive Edition

The title for best fighter on PS4 is fiercely fought over, but for our prize money King remains the, er, king. Easy to pick up, with plenty of depth, few fighters feel quite as crunchy as this. With all DLC characters now released, from Noctis to Negan, it's time to get sweaty.

TAYLOR MADE DEALS

Watching the pennies? We'll help you play more without breaking the bank

UNDER £20

Marvel's Midnight Suns

£15.95 approx (PS5, thegamecollection.net)

Super price for a heroic game

Drink at the bar with Wolverine, whack enemies into the waiting arms of Spider-Man, and help your good pal Blade navigate romance. You can do it all if you play your cards right. And we mean that literally. This underrated superhero gem comes from the XCOM studio, meaning the scraps between bonding sessions at the Abbey have a tactical card-playing layer as you plan out heroic strikes that'll send legions of goons tumbling like skittles, with plenty of synergy between your team of Marvel icons.

UNDER £15

Nier Replicant ver.1.22474487139...

£12.95 approx (PS4, amazon.co.uk)

Get closer to your budget

2B or not 2B, that is the question? Choose the latter and you'll meet the eponymous boy hero himself in this remastered version of Nier Automata's predecessor. Though the games are separated by a huge span of time, you'll appreciate the thematic parallels no matter which order you play them in. This is a huge upgrade from the PS3 game that includes not only new content and a non-headache-inducing framerate, but regeared combat as you slash through legions of the mysterious Shades while searching for a cure to your sister's strange illness.

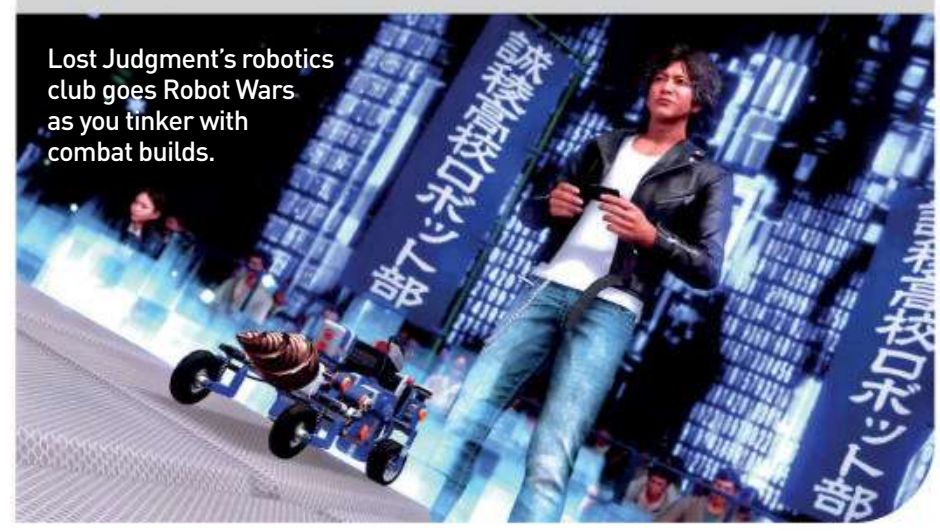
UNDER £10

Lost Judgment

£9.95 approx (PS4, thegamecollection.net)

A well-judged discount

Miss how the Yakuza games were before the series became Like A Dragon and swapped real-time brawls for turn-based scraps? Then the Judgment duology is for you. It's set in the same world but follows martial artist-detective and former lawyer Takayuki Yagami. In this sequel he visits Yokohama as he pulls at a thread leading to a grisly bullying epidemic at the high school. Things get serious, but the Yakuza charm is also in full force as he gets closer to the kids, including an in-depth side-story in which he ends up becoming the dance club's coach.



Lost Judgment's robotics club goes Robot Wars as you tinker with combat builds.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01 Synapse

Telekinesis and guns make a wonderful combo in VR. With one mapped to your left hand and the other to your right, you feel like a conductor of chaos as you blast your way through a rogue colonel's mind to uncover secrets. Eye-tracking is wonderfully used to target your telekinesis, meaning you can slam enemies all over the place as you reload your arsenal. It's got a roguelite structure, so you'll keep coming back.

02 Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

03 Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You.* Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

04 Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

05 Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

06 No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

07 Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

08 Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

09 Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

10 Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

11 The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

12 The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

13 Arizona Sunshine 2

The familiar survivalist beats of a 'one man against the apocalypse' setup are boosted by making that 'one man and his dog.' Zombie-offing action is already elevated in VR, but adding man's best friend to your arsenal makes this title one of the best in show.

14 Jurassic World Aftermath Collection

Clever girls for a clever game. You're looking to salvage research data from the dino park's ruins and get out alive, all while being hunted by 'raptors (like the tense scene from the original movie). Other dinos pop up, but the velociraptors are the focus, for better and worse.

15 What The Bat?

With your arms transformed into baseball bats, you must progress through loads of minigames that take you through different periods in your life. A great way to get used to 1:1 hand-tracking, the zany challenges are only let down by a slight lack of variety.

PSVR Hall of fame

GREAT EXPERIENCES TO THIS DAY

01

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

02

The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

03

Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

04

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

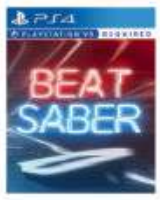
Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

05

Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

06



Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

07

Iron Man VR

With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

08

Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a *lot* of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

09

To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

10

I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

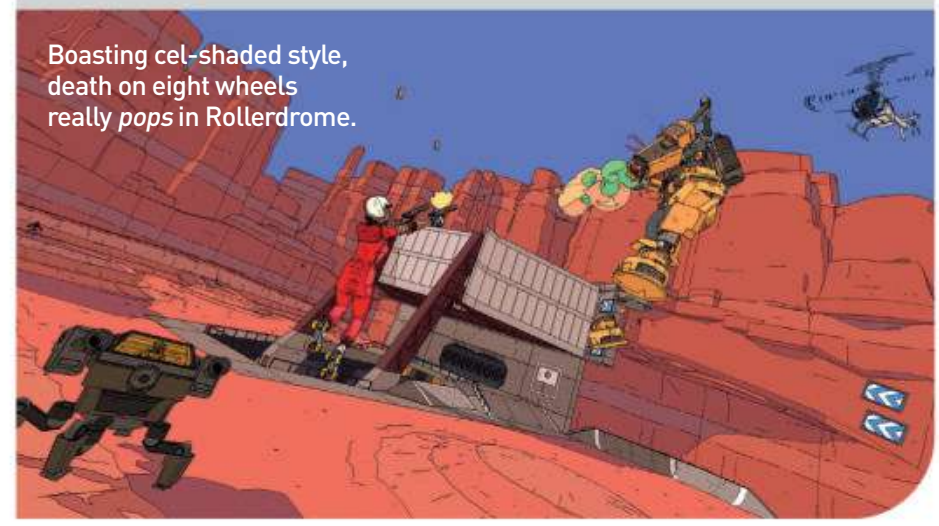
Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

PS Plus brought more than just warm fuzzies this February. First up in the selection of free games was **Steelrising**. Only on PS5, this soulslike reimagines the French Revolution if it were chock-full of robots. Then on PS5 and PS4 was the day-one release of bubbly shooter **Foamstars** (see p98).

Closing out the pack on both PS5 and PS4 was **Rollerdrome**, a single-player experience that seemingly answers the question, "What would happen if you strapped some rollerblades to hardboiled detective Max Payne and then tasked him with solving a murder set entirely within the confines of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater?" Given that wheelie rad gameplay pitch, it may not surprise you to read that the developer is none other than Roll7, of kickflipping OlliOlli series fame.

When creating this deadly competition in which you've no option but to rollerskate (and shoot) for your life, the developers took liberal inspiration from dystopian flicks Rollerball and The Running Man. As such, Rollerdrome is a little light on story but goes hard on a compelling gameplay loop. Rather than stumbling or even falling when you fluff a skate trick, you lose a little forward momentum. Skating very much shares the limelight with shooting, becoming one heck of a flavour combination when you sprinkle a little bit of slow-mo over lining up a shot while in midair *and* upside down. That's not to say there's no strategy involved, just that it's all the more satisfying once you work out the circuit through the arena that will allow you to most optimally blow away the competition.

If my balance wasn't so dreadful (many broken vases lie in the wake of my dance-mat past), I'd be tempted to strap on some skates myself. My wobbliness as it is, I'll settle for perfecting my route through Rollerdrome's next arena.



Boasting cel-shaded style, death on eight wheels really *pops* in Rollerdrome.

DIGITAL OFFER

FOR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION DEALS, TURN TO PAGE 52

PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO | PS PLUS
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DEATH STRANDING 2
Metal Gear's creator delivers baby ninja and electric guitar battles
SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG'S BACK FOR A TAKEOVER
RETRO RACING: NEW STAR GP'S DEVS ARE IN POLE POSITION
CAN METRO AWAKENING SAVE PSVR2?
Final Fantasy Special
→PS5 EXCLUSIVE
RISE OF THE RONIN
A samurai-sharp open world from Ninja Gaiden's devs
→EXCLUSIVE ACCESS
FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL
Why this bold new era is the perfect time to dive into the RPG titan
FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH
The most ambitious remake ever? Discover our first verdict inside
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→WE'VE PLAYED IT!
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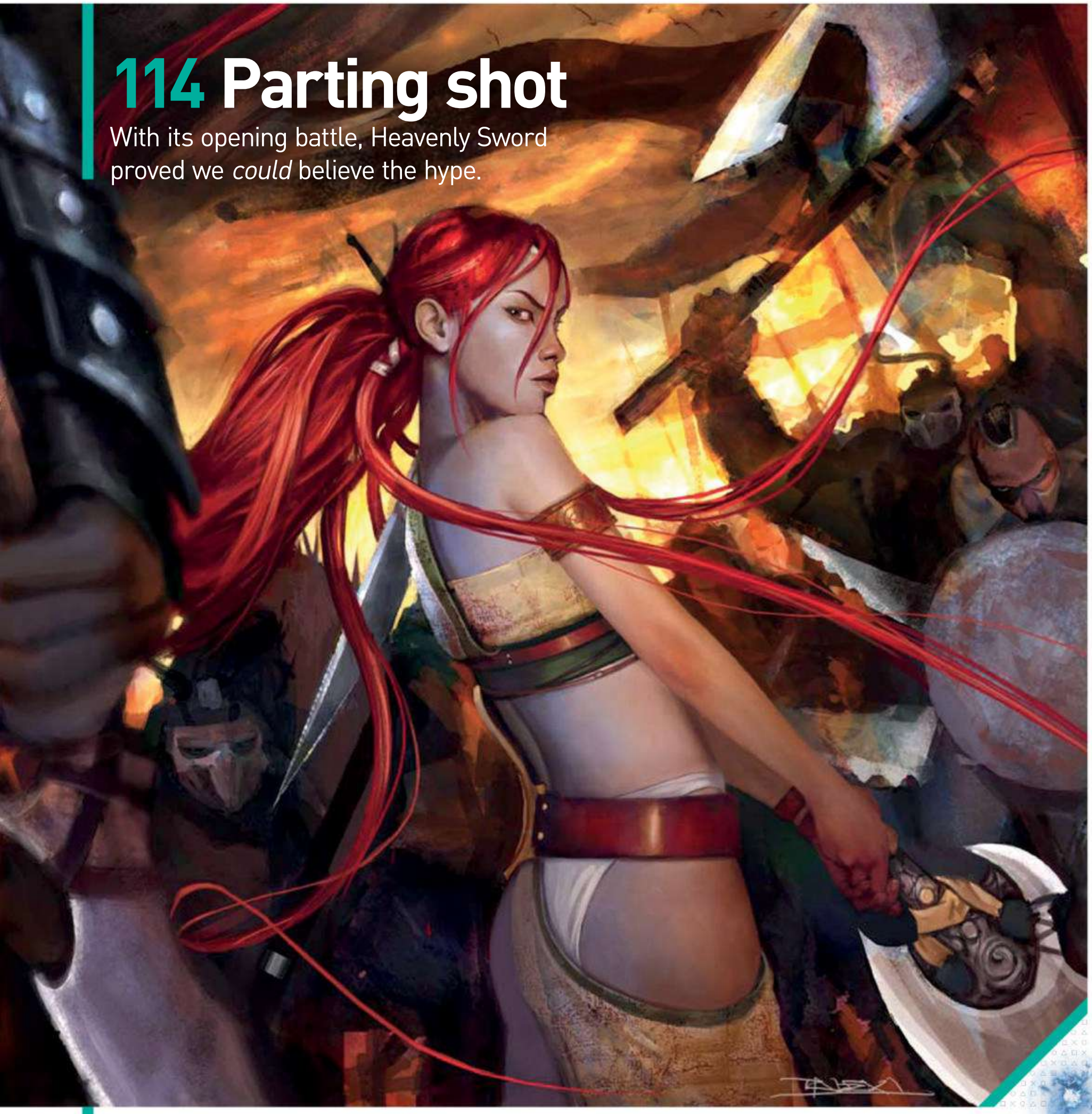
RetroStation

114 Parting shot

With its opening battle, Heavenly Sword proved we *could* believe the hype.



HIGHLIGHTS

MEMORY CARD: DARK SOULS 2 108 | DEFENDING: RIBBIE 109 | CLASSIC GAME: HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER 110 | PLUS POINTS: STAR WARS: EPISODE 1 – THE PHANTOM MENACE 112 | A BRIEF HISTORY OF... KART RACERS 113 | PARTING SHOT: HEAVENLY SWORD 114

DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these March moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

15 YEARS

Brilliant co-op only just saved the more action-orientated Resident Evil 5 from an awful AI companion. Stop wasting our ammo and healing herbs! Plus its depiction of Africa felt like it was co-developed by the concept of racism.

20 YEARS

Perfectly playable platformer Scooby-Doo: Mystery Mayhem captured the charm of the original cartoon rather well. Not nearly as dreadful as the Scooby-Doo 2 movie from the same year, which was the cinematic equivalent of making out with a hive of wasps.

25 YEARS

Pepsiman, a Japanese soft drink ad disguised as a PS1 game has maintained global appeal thanks to its off-kilter charm. Did it inspire the endless runners that'd become mobile's bread and butter? Perhaps; that's caffeine for you.

MEMORY CARD

Dark Souls II

Ten years old? Its toughest bosses took us nine...

As ever, even smaller foes can wreck you if you grow complacent – so armour up!

Before becoming the critical and commercial darling that made Elden Ring, FromSoftware released one of the most divisive sequels ever: Dark Souls II. Lacking both the intricate world design of the original and its visionary director (who was making Bloodborne) it's a bloated, messier adventure than its predecessor. "Still dislike it," says reader **Santino Lala**. "Worst of the series but still a good game."

Ah, yes, because for all its faults, it's still full of brilliant ideas. Like enemies that bash their way out of the mirrors they're trapped in, and a DLC fight with a boss that's literally *invisible*. "It's still a great game with amazing concepts," says reader **Fergusson Samy**. "I just wish it had better execution."

DARK SLOWS

A fast-forward feature might have helped. The glacial movement might come as a shock. However, stick with it and you'll find a massive adventure that rewards the faithful. "I still play it every day dude," claims **Hugo Rodriguez**, sounding like one of its forever-trapped NPCs. "The masterpiece of FromSoft IMO."

Hugo's far from its only defender. "It wasn't a copy and paste of the original Dark Souls and it forever suffered because of that," says **Andrew Ritter**. That's definitely true, and it's easy to take for granted how audacious From's design decisions were. Without that gambler's mindset, we may never have received the parry-or-perish brilliance of Sekiro or the open-world masterpiece that is Elden Ring.

Just be warned that it might be the last thing you ever play. "Want to cure a gaming addiction? Play this one," says **Adam Mackowiak**. If we ever get another rerelease, we doubt we'll see that quoted on the box.

INFO

PUB Bandai Namco Entertainment

DEV FromSoftware

RELEASED ON PS3

RELEASE 2014

IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS...
Elden Ring also feels like a sequel to Dark Souls but with a different twist; meanwhile Hollow Knight takes the Souls charm into 2D

Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

2,500,000

Copies sold within a year in the US and EU, faster than the first game, even if its appeal has been shorter-lived.

5,762

Attempts later, we finally downed The Pursuer. Not one of our favourite gaming memories, that one.

03

Excellent DLCs collectively known as The Lost Crowns trilogy. They're well worth checking out.

DEFENDING

Ribbie

The WWE 2K series' most-hated character needs to return, insists Ben Wilson

No wrestling game has ever been so thoroughly despised and mocked with internet memes quite like WWE 2K20. It felt unfinished upon release, following the decision to let long-time developer Yuke's go halfway through development. Indeed, 2K20 was so awful that the series was put on hold for two and a half years. A fictional character called Ribbie was the most hated 'wrestler' on its roster.

Why, then, would anyone want this daft lump resuscitated? Great question. Ribbie's backstory was clearly written in three minutes, probably when one of the team was bored. He's an anthropomorphic rib who moonlights as the mascot of the Memphis Sliders, sporting blue sunglasses, white gloves, and an insufferable grin. He's uninspired, unlikeable – and utterly brilliant as a result.

Historically, jobbers, or curtain-jerkers, have played a huge part in pro wrestling. They're guys remunerated to do nothing more than take a fast, emphatic beating. Icons like Hulk Hogan and Ultimate Warrior found fame based on squash matches, where they'd hammer these dudes in under a minute and look the business while doing so. But these unsung heroes don't often make it into videogames. Ribbie changed that – he's the ultimate in pummellable punchbags.

Just picture his triumphant return in WWE 2K24. Fancy a Solo Sikoa face turn? Have him spike Ribbie into oblivion. Want to cement Cody Rhodes as the new hero of WWE? See Dusty's boy devour Ribbie in ten seconds. Feel LA Knight is the man to build the company around? Let him barbecue the walking, talking rib while coated in JR's Bar-B-Q sauce. Or pull the ultimate swerve and have Ribbie end Roman Reigns' thousand-day reign as world champ. You're coming around, aren't you? Ribbie for breakfast, lunch, and dinner: you know it sounds delicious.

> THE NAME'S CHASE. HAD A STINT AT THE PERFORMANCE CENTER RECENTLY. OR YOU MIGHT EVEN KNOW ME AS 'RIBBIE'. RING ANY BELLS? OH, DON'T PLAY DUMB WITH ME..."
>
> Fictional WWE 2K23 character Chase 'fesses up to being the man in the Ribbie costume, and says it put Shawn Michaels off signing him to NXT.

INFO

MAIN GAMES
WWE 2K20

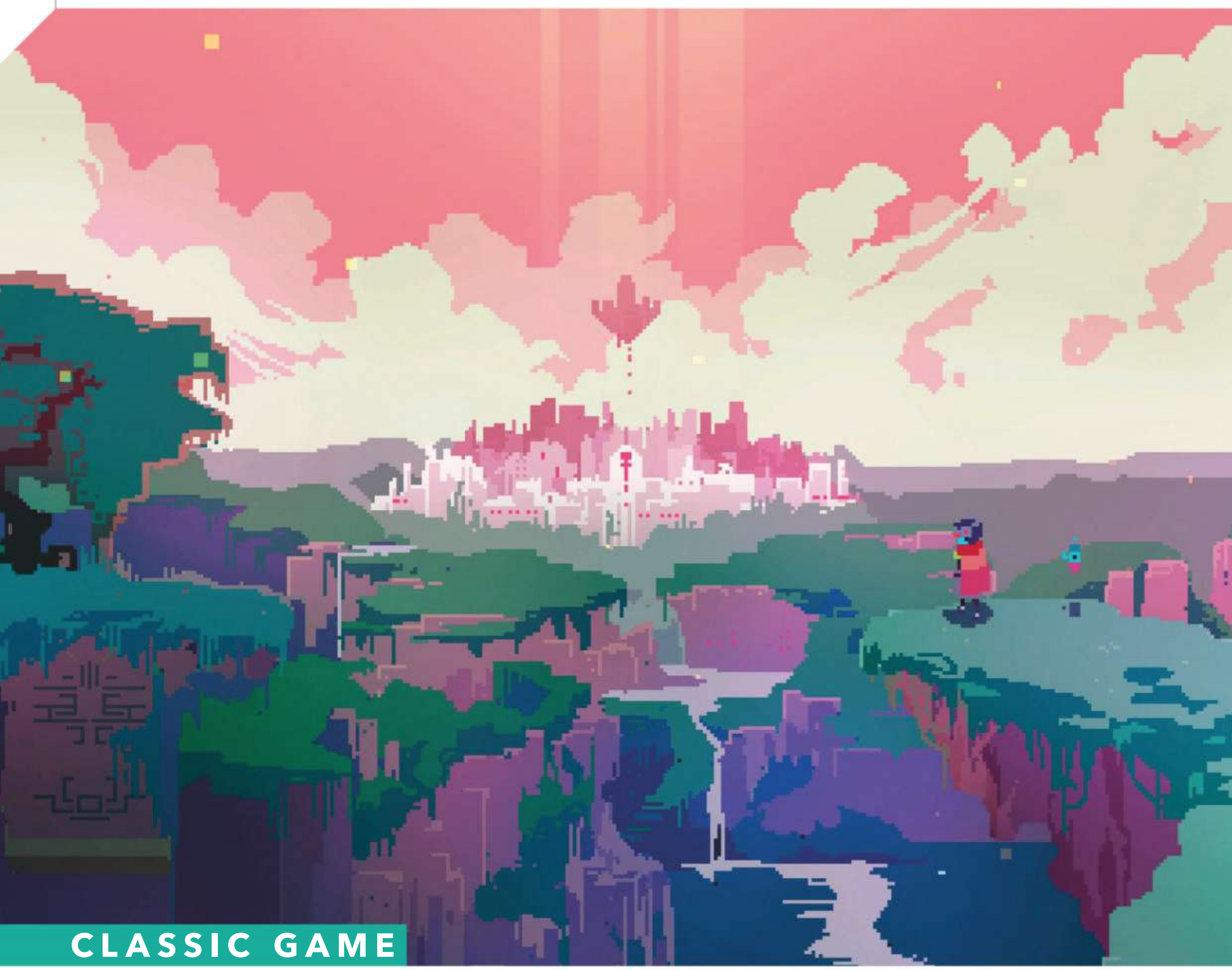
STATS
Ribbie was one of six fictional inclusions, along with Brooklyn von Braun, Cole Quinn, El Mago Jr, Josie Jane, and Reilly Flash.

The reception to WWE 2K20 was so poor that WWE went back to promoting predecessor WWE 2K19 onscreen.

The best bit was a Southpaw Regional Wrestling DLC which reimagined Rusev as Big Bartholomew, and Becky Lynch as Misfit Molly.

SPIN-OFFS
WWE 2K22, WWE 2K23

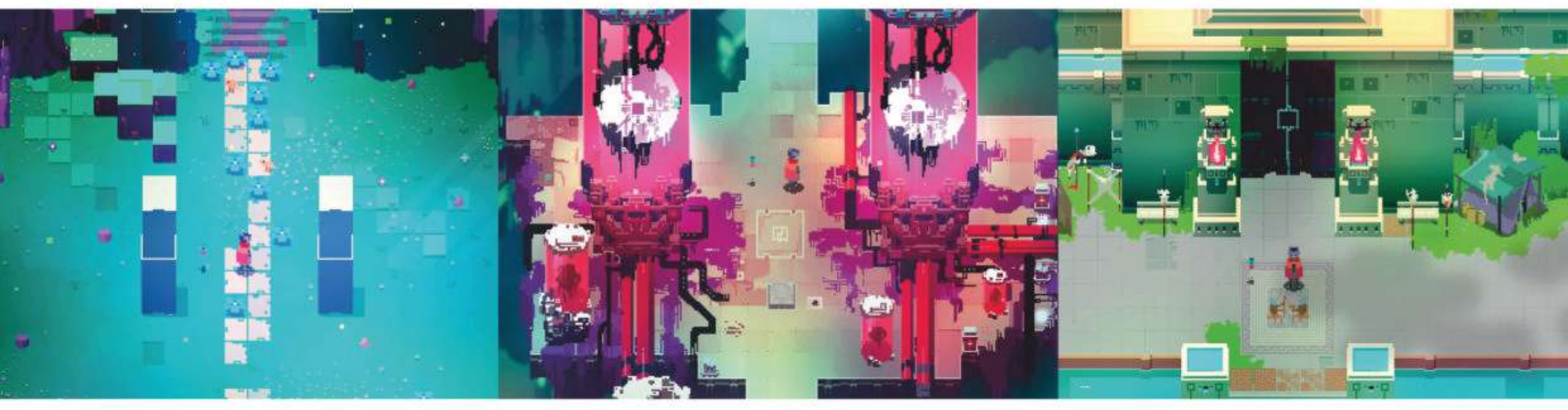
HOW TO PLAY?
Amazon, £13.95



CLASSIC GAME

Hyper Light Drifter

Fighting monsters and illness in a pixel-perfect adventure



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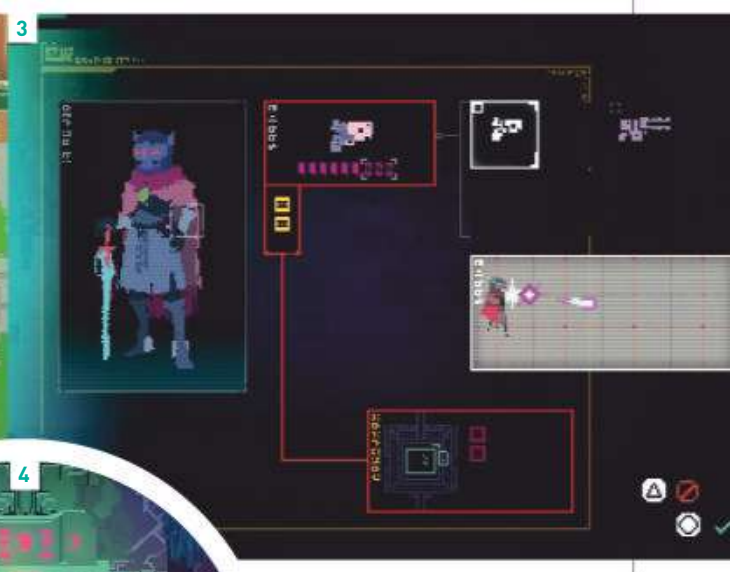

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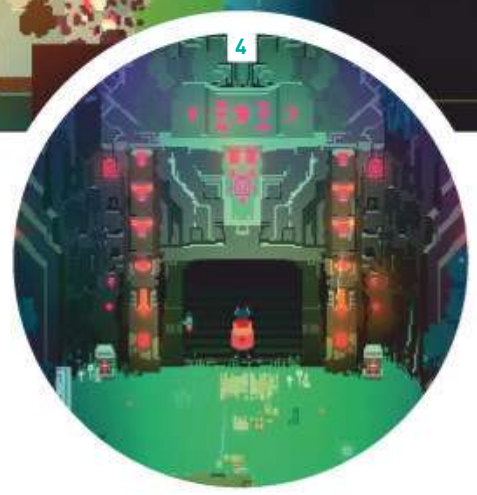


4

1 The map could be more helpful, especially for tracking discoveries. 2 A Boss Rush mode unlocks once you finish the story. 3 Look out for rare upgrade materials that you can use to soup up your guns. 4 The ruins seem to be powered by a strangely advanced technology. 5 These hooded vultures are a minor enemy type, but you shouldn't take them lightly.

Pixel art is often deployed to give games a retro feel but when used well it can do so much more. For its first game, Hyper Light Drifter, indie studio Heart Machine wielded the power of the pixel to give its 2D action adventure a darker edge. Somehow, it makes those tiny squares seem rather sinister.

Static screenshots don't tell the full story, which is that everything in Hyper Light Drifter feels a little... off. The jagged lines of pixel art are one reason why, roughly defining the world and its inhabitants as corrupted, or otherwise not quite themselves. Indeed, the world *is* corrupted by a purple blight that seems to have turned the majority of people and animals into mindless killers, with only a handful of survivors in a central village retaining their senses. Your character, the Drifter, also remains compos mentis, though is far from healthy, suffering a chronic illness that sees them stop to cough up fluid now and again. When they do, lines of static interference fizz across the screen, as though your own PS4 is infected. Along with the game's fine animation and a brewing synthetic score, these details help to create Hyper Light Drifter's uncomfortable, almost itchy texture.

HACK AND DASH

In short, it's fair to say that there's a somewhat downbeat vibe to your adventure, and not much in this scenario could be described as 'light', hyper or otherwise. Your only hope is to track down the shadowy entity that's the source of the doom and gloom and give it a kicking. Before that, though, you need to head out in each of the four compass directions to locations stuffed with monsters and platforming challenges, each capped off by an obligatory boss. To facilitate your efforts, you're armed with a sword, a gun, and a versatile dash ability that can save you from enemy blows and pitfalls alike.

The drifter's skills can be tricky to execute efficiently at first, but are well worth the trouble to master. You can, for example, string dashes together infinitely, though sustaining the chain – as is necessary in a few challenges – requires precise rhythmic timing. Similarly, in combat you have to pick your moments to trim slices off your opponent's life bar, then zip away before they respond in kind. Your gun also packs a punch, but leaves you rooted to the spot as you aim, so you first need to fashion yourself the breathing space to use it. When it all clicks, the drifter moves and kills like a right little ninja.

PIXEL HUNTER

While the action is enjoyable – including an optional horde mode and even a one-on-one football minigame – Hyper Light Drifter truly excels when it comes to exploration. The main paths through each area are clear enough, but the scenery around them is as packed with juicy secrets as a politician's church confession. Look out for markings on the ground that denote hidden switches and lifts. Push against walls or bushes and you may unearth passages leading off the current screen to somewhere long forgotten. Maybe you'll find one of a number of keys there – the more you collect, the more of the world's doors you can open, leading to further intrigue along with tangible rewards.

Yet as much as the game draws you in, that 'off' feeling never entirely dissipates. In each of the four main locations, the scenery is pretty in its own twisted way, especially the snowy peaks of the northern mountains and the flooded ruins to the east, engulfed in crisp blue water and bright greenery. But even these scenic routes are scattered with skeletal remains, not to mention the mobs of vulture people or carnivorous amphibians that presumably picked those carcasses clean. Nowhere in this land makes you feel at ease, and it's oddly quiet too... aside from the doom-soaked music, which increases the eeriness all the more. Even on the odd occasion when people talk to you, their speech bubbles show pictures rather than words, which stops conversation as soon as it starts.

The world of Hyper Light Drifter is hard and hostile, but despite (or because of) that, equally as fascinating. As much as it tries to give you the cold shoulder, it only makes you want to plumb the depths of that glorious pixel art all the more. ■

> **"Lines of static interference fizz across the screen, as though your own PS4 is infected."**

INFO

PUB Heart Machine

DEV Heart Machine

RELEASED 2016

GET IT NOW
PS Store: £15.49

NEED TO KNOW

1 The drifter's illness reflects designer Alx Preston's experience of congenital heart disease.

2 The game's Kickstarter funding campaign had a target of $27,000 but eventually raised $645,000.

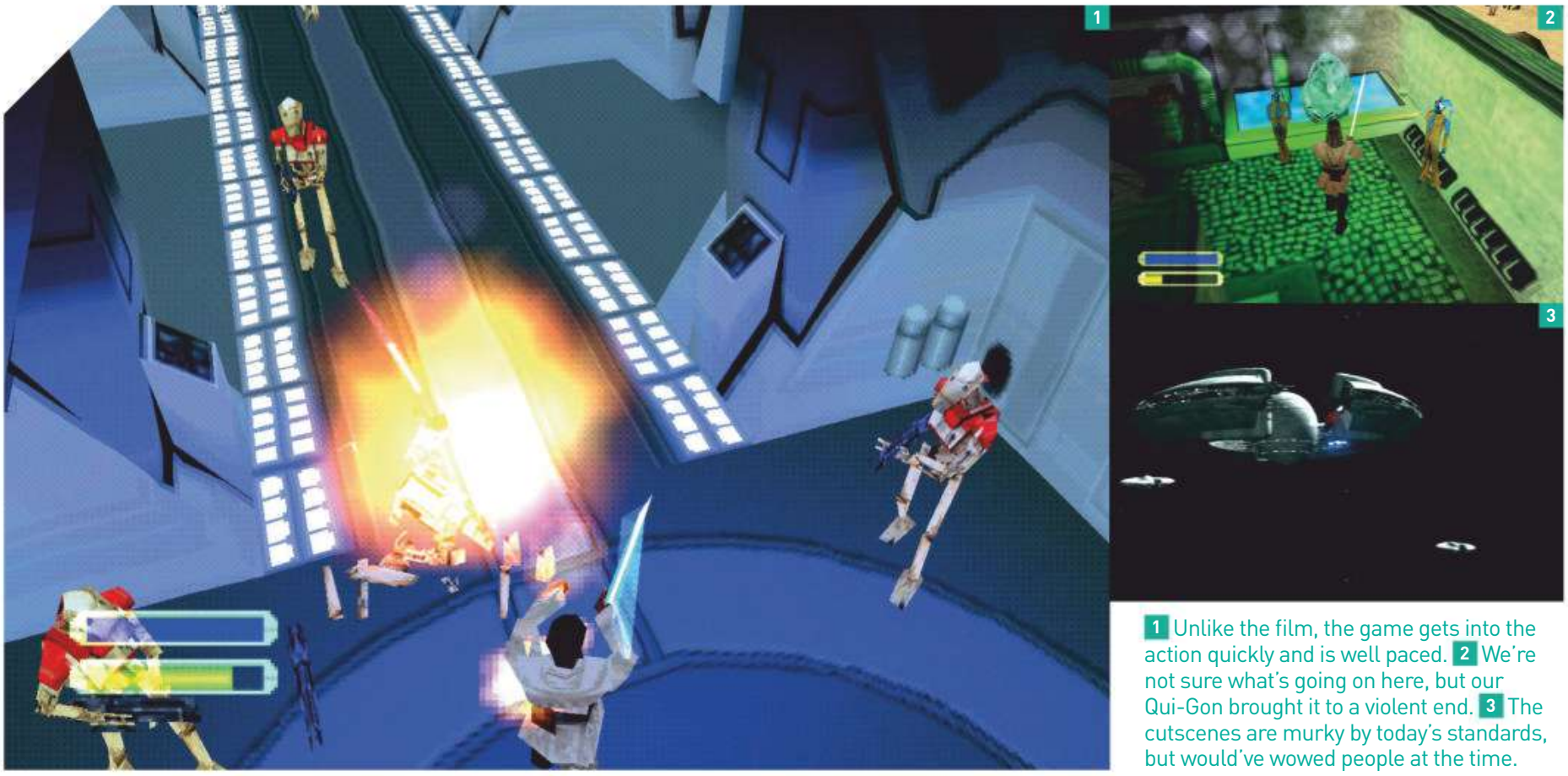
3 Heart Machine's second game, Solar Ash, is set within the same universe.

5

PLUS POINTS

Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace

Can be a little Jar Jarring to play today



1 Unlike the film, the game gets into the action quickly and is well paced. 2 We're not sure what's going on here, but our Qui-Gon brought it to a violent end. 3 The cutscenes are murky by today's standards, but would've wowed people at the time.

The answer to your first question is yes, this slightly creaky interactive interpretation *is* still superior to the film that inflicted the idea of midichlorians onto the world.

However, the game has issues of its own today, beginning with the way it looks. The graphics have been given a polish, which helps to emphasise the fact that, despite hardware limitations, the developers did a good job. However, the camera is often zoomed in too close, or set at an angle you're dying to adjust (which you can't[1]). It's also worth saying that if your eyes are sensitive to anything less than a freshly waxed framerate, you'll want to give it a miss.

TATOOINE ARTIST

It's also, at times, sadistically difficult. Where's regenerating health when you need it? Still, you get that lightsaber sound effect, *and* you can use the Jedi weapon to deflect laser shots. It must be said, too, that (most of) the stand-in actors do a great job of emulating their cinematic counterparts.

One aspect above endears the game to us. We have no idea how the devs got away with this, but your Jedi can kill pretty much anybody, including unarmed citizens.[2] You can't deny that a Qui-Gon Bad rampage would have made for a more interesting movie.

INFO

PUB LucasArts
DEV Big Ape Productions
RELEASED 1999

FOOTNOTES 1 Instead, the right stick sends your character diving to avoid attacks. **2** We'll never forget the kid at Mos Espa who asked us "Who you gonna murder next, mister?"

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"I'M LOOKING FOR A T-14 HYPERDRIVE GENERATOR.' [...] PLAYED IT SO MUCH AS A KID SOME OF THE LINES ARE BURNED INTO MY BRAIN"
@BetamaxBandit

"I NEVER FINISHED IT WHEN I WAS A KID UNFINISHED BUSINESS"
Christie Sean

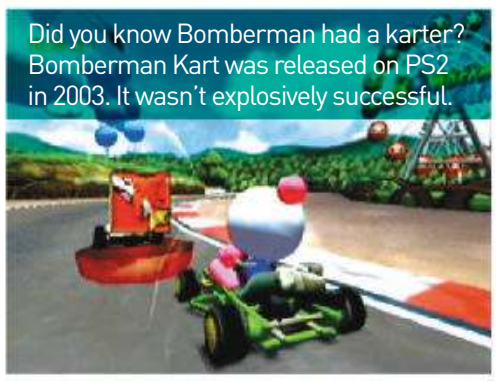
"IT WAS UTTER POO"
Ian Daffy Newell

▷ The PSP revolution will be televised with **Resistance: Retribution** on PS Plus

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

Kart racers

We're not tyred of the genre yet



Did you know Bomberman had a karter? Bomberman Kart was released on PS2 in 2003. It wasn't explosively successful.

Nicktoons Racing (PS1, 2001) featured Nickelodeon characters including CatDog, SpongeBob, Angelica, and Tommy.

2001's Toy Story Racer had a total of 15 different tournament, minigame, and race types. Generous for PS1 racers.

The first Crash Team Racing game was released in 2001, with sequels following. Yes, Smurfs Kart for PS4 and PS5 really happened in 2023. **2006's Mortal Kombat: Armageddon had a truly awful Motor Kombat minigame.**

MOD CONS

Put your kart into it

Although rarely talked about today, ModNation Racers was an ambitious community-driven game that deserved to continue through the console generations. Developed by United Front Games for PS3 and released in 2010, it allowed players to create and share characters, karts, and tracks online. It spawned PSP and Vita versions; the servers were finally shut down in 2018.

SACKBOY AND FRIENDS TOOK TO THE TRACK IN **LITTLEBIGPLANET KARTING** (2012) ON PS3, FROM THE DEVELOPER OF **MODNATION RACERS**.

Pac-Man World Rally wakka wakka'd joyfully onto PlayStation 2 in 2006.

Disney Speedstorm (2023) saw the House Of Mouse embrace F2P racing.

Touring Karts (2019) on PS4 offered PSVR functionality, adding some much-needed immersion to what was a rather humdrum racing game.

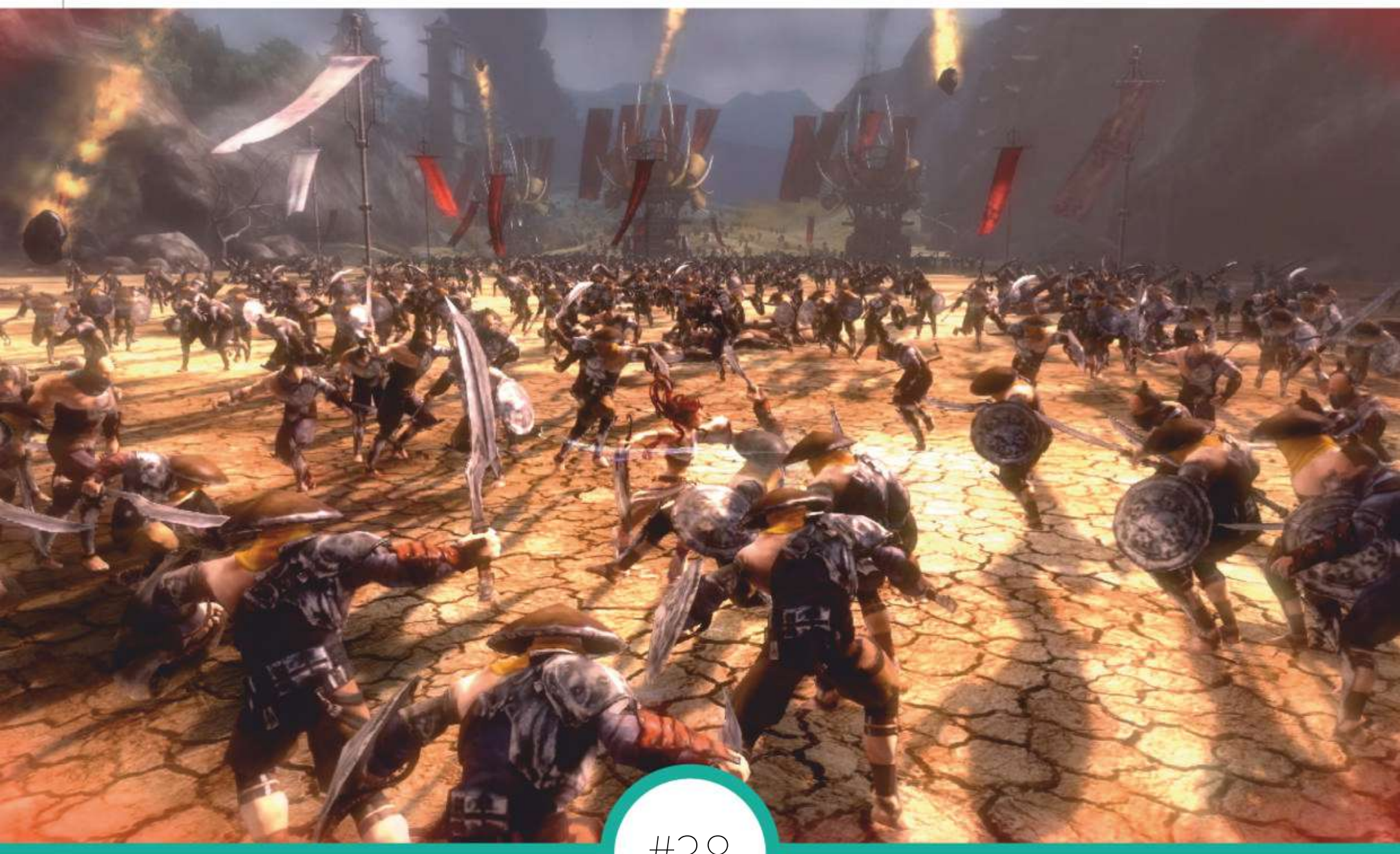
Garfield Kart: Furious Racing (2019) allows up to four people to race one another while expressing their shared great dislike for Mondays.

DREAM CAST

Sega gets into (game) gear

Sega may have bowed out of console production, but it held onto its franchises. In 2010 Sumo Digital's Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing used characters, vehicles, and tracks lifted from or inspired by games including Shenmue, Samba De Amigo, and Sonic The Hedgehog. The Transformed sequel arrived two years later.

▷ Next issue: investigating the history of **stealth** on the quiet



#38

Believe the hype

With **Heavenly Sword**, PS3 delivered one of the biggest prerendered promises of 2005's infamous E3

FORMAT PS3 / **PUB** SONY / **DEV** NINJA THEORY / **RELEASED** 2007

The PS3 trailers of E3 2005 were a lot to live up to. But while Heavenly Sword didn't quite justify the phenomenal hype when it dropped in 2007, it managed to live up to one promise; PS3 had been shown to be capable of rendering an entire battlefield, and Heavenly Sword kicks off by delivering exactly that.

You are handed control of Nariko as the camera pulls down from above, revealing our heroine facing some 200 soldiers. Great balls of fire are raining from the sky (goodness gracious indeed); it looks like a scene straight out of Peter Jackson's The Hobbit. It's chaotic, brief, and a touch scrappy by today's standards, but it happens – complete with that trailer's canned kill animation where a soldier gets scythed up the middle.

The ambition outpaced the hardware's capabilities to a certain extent. There's screen tearing everywhere, and many frames are repeated, which is a shame when stupendous-looking footage of emulated versions featuring 4K resolution and 60fps can be found on YouTube. Even so, going through PS3 footage frame by frame shows phenomenal detail like cloth physics in the waving banners, Nariko's hair flowing, shadows being cast by each soldier, and fireballs sending combatants flailing skywards.

In 2007, no console could have delivered this scene flawlessly. But that didn't stop Ninja Theory wringing PS3 for all it was worth to make its point: Heavenly Sword may not have been real in its trailer, but it was most definitely real now. ■

TIME TO PLAY? This is the first playable scene, coming right after a brief intro and diorama-like battlefield scene where the camera zooms in to Nariko's wide eye. The screen goes black, you're prompted which buttons to press to attack, and then you're in.

NEXT MONTH

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ZENLESS ZONE ZERO

Hands-on with HoYoverse's frantic take on character action!

PLAY

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